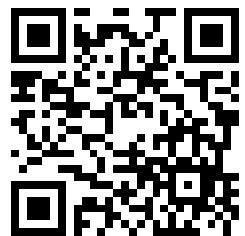

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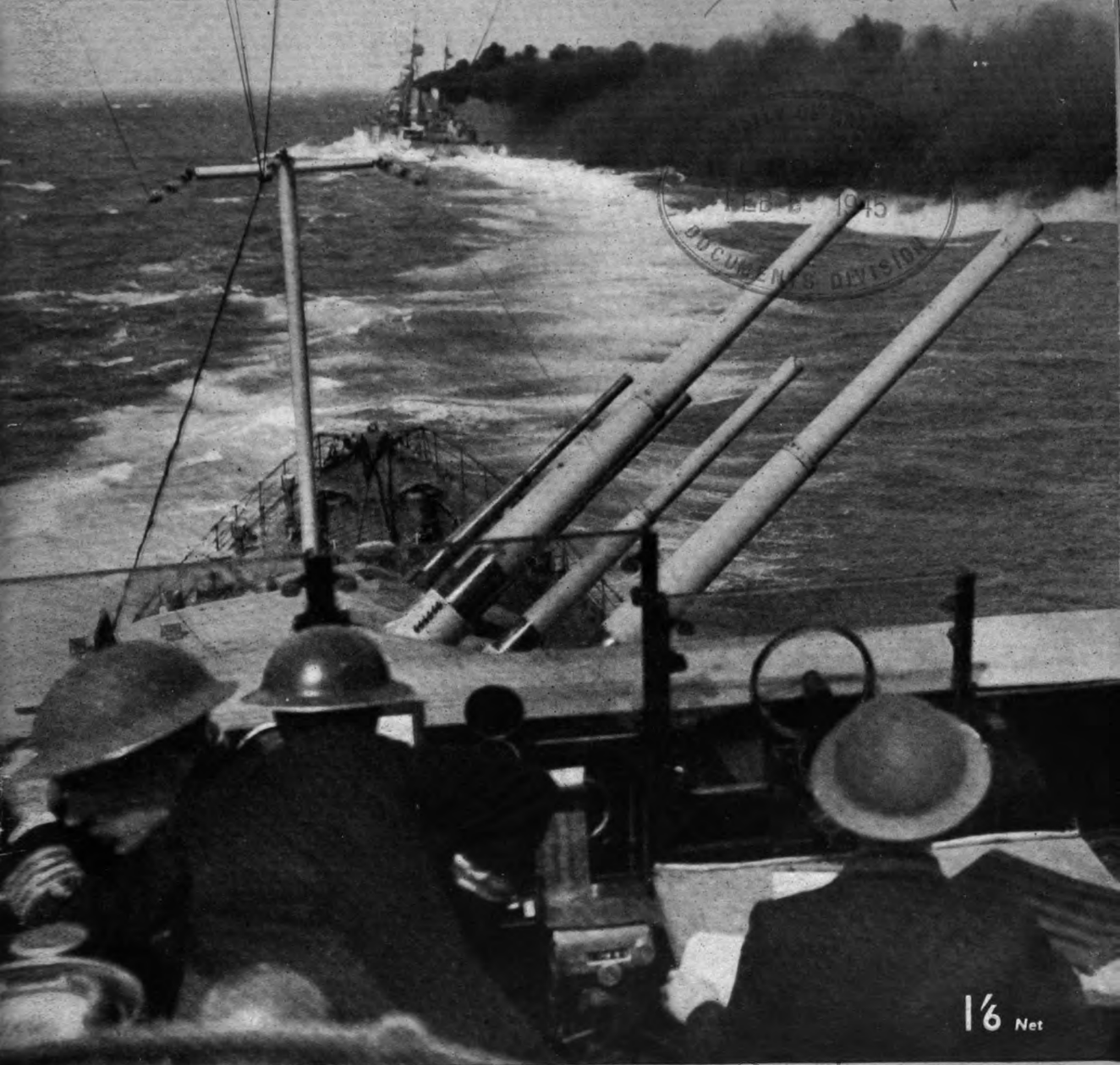
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THE ADMIRALTY ACCOUNT OF NAVAL OPERATIONS: APRIL 1941 to JANUARY 1943







DUEL NEAR PANTELLARIA. An enemy submarine has been
sunk with depth charges by a British destroyer.

THE *1874-1943*
MEDITERRANEAN
FLEET

GREECE to TRIPOLI

The Admiralty Account of Naval Operations

April 1941 to January 1943



London : His Majesty's Stationery Office



DUEL NEAR PANTELLARIA. An enemy submarine has been found. She is attacked with depth-charges by a British destroyer.

THE *137.000*
MEDITERRANEAN
FLEET

GREECE to TRIPOLI

The Admiralty Account of Naval Operations
April 1941 to January 1943



London : His Majesty's Stationery Office

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Contents

1. The Claws of the Crab	page 7
2. Fifty Thousand Men by Night	„ 12
3. The Battle of Crete Begins	„ 20
4. Naked Under Heaven	„ 28
5. The Claw Takes Hold	„ 34
6. Once More Unto the Breach	„ 40
7. The Last Rally of the Royal Marines	„ 45
8. The Back Door of Tobruk	„ 48
9. The Little Ships Go Forward	„ 57
10. Scourge of the Axis Supplies	„ 64
11. The Storm Breaks on Malta	„ 73
12. The Mediterranean's Darkest Hour	„ 82
13. Command from Suez to Gibraltar	„ 87

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THERE ARE MANY MEN AND WOMEN IN THE FORCES WHO WOULD WELCOME A CHANCE OF READING THIS BOOK,
IF YOU HAND IT INTO THE NEAREST POST OFFICE, IT WILL GO TO THEM

THE SKIRMISH OFF SFAX. By moonlight on 16th April, 1941, four destroyers sink an enemy convoy of five merchantmen and three escorting destroyers heading for Tripoli.

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AT THE HEIGHT OF BATTLE. During the invasion of Crete the cruiser Fiji turns at high speed to avoid a stick of bombs.

THE LAST LIFT FROM CRETE. Soon after midnight on 30th May, 1941, the last convoy sails from Sfakia with 4,000 troops on board.

THE TOBRUK RUN. The motor vessel Tiberio with supplies and petrol for the besieged garrison is heavily attacked from the air.

The paintings reproduced here are by Lieutenant-Commander Rowland Langmaid, R.N., who was attached to Admiral Cunningham's staff as official Admiralty artist. Acknowledgment is also due to Lieutenant-Commander G. M. S. Stitt, R.N., on whose sketch-map the map of the withdrawal from Greece is based.



This book continues the story of the Royal Navy begun in "East of Malta, West of Suez." It opens in April, 1941. The Italian Fleet was then greatly weakened by the losses inflicted at Taranto and Matapan, but this did not deter the Germans from proceeding with their plan to capture Suez and dominate the entire Mediterranean. During the next eighteen months the Navy, although never ceasing to attack the enemy supply lines to Libya, fought on the defensive and against heavy odds. The withdrawals from Greece and Crete, the supplying of the armies in the desert and of the besieged garrisons of Tobruk and Malta, were its main tasks in a situation which became steadily more serious until, in October, 1942, the Allied forces were strong enough to take the initiative and begin the advance that eventually drove the enemy from Africa. The story concludes in January, 1943, when Tripoli fell into our hands and the Navy again assumed command of the great supply route through the Mediterranean.

I. The Claws of the Crab

APRIL, 1941

ON 31ST MARCH, 1941, under their new commander, Rommel, the German and Italian armies counter-attacked in Cyrenaica. They moved forward in strength from a line west of El Agheila, to which they had been driven back by the advance of the Army of the Nile in its first offensive under General Wavell. The enemy had been reinforced through Tripoli. With its tanks and mechanised vehicles and highly trained infantry, the Afrika Korps had arrived upon the desert scene. The Army of the Nile had not been strengthened; in fact, it had been gravely weakened. The greater part of the British forces in Libya had been withdrawn, in fulfilment of a promise to meet the German armies menacing Greece. The Army of the Nile fell back step by step across the ground so recently won.

One by one the wreckage-littered harbours were relinquished. Benghazi went, then Derna and Bardia. The Inshore Squadron of the Mediterranean Fleet, formed to co-operate with the land forces, mined the harbours as it withdrew eastward, and wondered when it would see

them again. By 14th April, the enemy was back on the Egyptian frontier. Only the fortress of Tobruk held out. It had its back door open to the sea, and the Navy sustained it.

Simultaneously with their advance in Libya, on 6th April, the Germans invaded Yugoslavia and Greece without ultimatum or the declaration of war.

A glance at the map of the Mediterranean shows their strategy to be, on paper, exceedingly effective. Imagine Germany like a crab, sprawling over Central Europe, and thrusting out its claws to the southward. One is meant to scoop into Egypt through Italy and Libya, the other to penetrate through the Balkans and Greece. The Central and Eastern Mediterranean would be enveloped in this armoured clasp; the deadly pincers would meet at Suez. The British Army in Libya was already in retreat, and if the British and Greek Armies in Greece could be annihilated, nothing could keep those pincers apart, nothing except the British Fleet, continuing to hold command of the Mediterranean Sea.

The weak spot in the right-hand claw—the joint in its armour—was the short sea passage from Italy to Tripoli. But the light forces which would otherwise have harried the enemy convoys on this route were covering the passage of the British Army into Greece. Indeed, in order to hasten this operation, the cruisers themselves were acting as fast transports, making the dangerous passage past the Dodecanese during the dark hours.

Until light forces could be spared to raid the lines of communication with Libya, it was left to the submarines, the R.A.F. and the Fleet Air Arm Swordfish at Malta to impede the passage of German and Italian reinforcements. But in spite of the steady sinking of transports, tankers, and supply ships, the enemy received enough reinforcements to compel the Army of the Nile to continue its retreat. It became necessary eventually for Peter to be robbed in order to pay Paul, and the 14th Destroyer Flotilla—the Jervis, Janus, Nubian and Mohawk—was detached from the forces in the Aegean and sent to Malta to harry the Axis convoys.

It wasted no time on arrival in dealing with the right-hand claw. On 15th April, a reconnaissance Swordfish reported a convoy of five merchant ships, escorted by three destroyers, bound for Tripoli. Under cover of rain and mist the four destroyers slipped out of harbour, and at 2 a.m. the Jervis sighted ships to the southward.

The weather had cleared: it was a moonlit night, and blowing freshly from the north-west. Captain Mack led his flotilla in line ahead round the rear of the convoy so that the targets would be silhouetted against the moon. From subsequent events it appears likely that the enemy was expecting to be joined by reinforcements. If the British destroyers were seen at all, there were no misgivings until the Jervis opened fire upon one of the escorting destroyers as she ranged abeam of her. She poured pom-pom and 4.7 inch into her for five minutes and left her sinking. The Jervis next engaged

another destroyer and battered her into silence. She then selected the rear merchant ship as her target. The Nubian followed suit, after which the Janus and the Nubian transferred their attention to the next ship in the line.

At this point another of the enemy destroyers was sighted by the Mohawk, rushing past her at high speed. The Mohawk engaged her for some minutes; then, seeing her stopped and on fire, followed the Nubian to the head of the line to attack the leading ship of the convoy which was still undamaged. This vessel showed unusual initiative in an attempt to ram the Mohawk, and as Commander Eaton altered course to avoid collision, his ship was struck by a torpedo. It was probably at this moment that another enemy destroyer, a new arrival, joined in the fight, unnoticed in the smoke of the mêlée. Although the Mohawk's stern had been blown off by the explosion of the torpedo and the after part of the ship was under water, her foremost guns opened fire on the undamaged merchant ship and continued to engage her until she lay stopped, blazing fiercely. But for this gallant persistence, the leading ship in the convoy might have escaped.

In the meanwhile, the Jervis was engaging ships at ranges varying from 50 yards to a mile. She found herself at one moment showered with fragments of shells, as an ammunition ship in the convoy blew up with an enormous explosion. Smoke and flames leaped 2,000 feet into the darkness; the sea appeared to have turned into a boiling cauldron.

A big enemy destroyer at the head of the convoy showed fight and came at the Jervis as if intending to ram her; at the last moment, though, she altered course, passing too close to the Jervis to allow the 4.7-inch guns to be used. The Jervis, however, raked her with pom-pom and machine-gun fire and the Janus obligingly finished her off.

It was a wild scene upon which the moon looked down through drifting clouds. Smoke

poured from the burning wrecks, blown by the wind across a stormy sea that the conflagrations flecked wine red. Backwards and forwards through this billowing curtain ranged the destroyers. They hunted in couples, the Jervis and Janus, Nubian and—until she was torpedoed—the Mohawk. The white-hot flashes of their guns and bursting shells illuminated them momentarily to each other. The vivid light revealed the flying spray split by their bows, the ghostly superstructures and raking funnels, the clusters of staring human faces, each encircled by the brim of a shrapnel helmet, in the rear of pom-poms and machine-guns and torpedo tubes. Round all this chiaroscuro of fury curved the darkness, punctured and rent by the arcs of tracer bullets and by explosions.

Although most of the Mohawk's stern had

been blown away, the propellers were still there, and the undaunted engineering staff decided to attempt to get way on the ship.

They were engaged on this task when out of the smoke and darkness another torpedo struck the Mohawk, and she began to sink. When she was on her beam ends, with the after half submerged, her captain gave the order to abandon ship. The ship's company was presently picked up by the Jervis and the Nubian. One hundred and sixty-eight officers and men were saved, including the captain. "Roll out the barrel!" they sang lustily in chorus, guiding the rescuing destroyers through the darkness from one raft to another.

The bag for the night was three destroyers and five merchantmen. One of them was subsequently found ashore abandoned, in the

AID FOR GREECE. The cruiser Ajax lands men and equipment at the Piraeus, the port of Athens. They wait on the quayside ready to move north to meet the threat from the German armies assembling on the Greek and Yugoslav frontiers.



neighbourhood of Sfax on the Tunisian coast.

In his despatch dealing with the matter, the captain of the *Jervis* described the action as "the skirmish off Sfax."

Six days later, before the moment came for the Navy to pit itself against the inexorable advance of the German left-hand claw, the Commander-in-Chief decided to intensify the attempt to crack the right-hand one by bombarding Tripoli with the battle fleet. The bombardment was carried out early on the morning of 21st April from inside enemy minefields, flares being dropped and spotting carried out by aircraft from the aircraft-carrier *Formidable*. A raid by the R.A.F., in which 10 tons of bombs were dropped, preceded the bombardment. The Navy's guns then flung 530 tons of shells into the place. Numerous merchant ships and a destroyer were sunk in the harbour. Immense damage was done to buildings, power stations and sidings ashore. The operation took the fleet 900 miles from its base, within range of enemy airfields capable of releasing clouds of bombers and torpedo-carrying

aircraft against the bombarding squadron. It was an exploit of shrewdly calculated audacity.

The expected counter-attack from the air did not in fact materialise; nothing happened. There was almost a feeling of anticlimax on the bridge of the flagship as the fleet re-formed and steamed east again.

"Well," said the Commander-in-Chief to Commodore Edelsten, his Chief of Staff, "what shall we do now?"

The dawn was coming. Astern, a pall of smoke and dust tinged with the glow of fires mounting to the zenith marked the accomplishment of what they had set out to do.

"Let's have a cup of coffee," suggested the Chief of Staff. "All right," agreed the Admiral. He was in all things the man of action, but he hadn't thought of coffee. "And I will make it."

The fleet returned to Alexandria with the loss of one *Fulmar*. There was no other casualty. The *Formidable's* *Fulmars* accounted for ten enemy aircraft, mostly shadowers, on the passage.

Meanwhile, things were not going well



QUIET BEFORE STORM AT SUDA. The battleship *Barham* is oiling in Suda Bay from the tanker secured alongside. In Greece the Army was falling back. On 16th April the decision to withdraw was taken, and the Mediterranean Fleet prepared for the difficult operation.

for the Allies in Greece. The Germans had probably massed 250,000 men in Bulgaria for the invasion of Thrace. Other mechanised hordes were pouring through Yugoslavia, through the Monastir gap and the valley of the Vardar, supported by bombers which by sheer numerical superiority blasted a way for the tanks pouring south. A thin Greek and British line stretched from the snows of the Albanian frontier eastward and south-eastward to Mount Olympus and the sea: by 14th April they were fighting a rearguard action as they withdrew to the Thermopylae position. On the 15th, Rear-Admiral H. T. Baillie-Grohman, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., went to Athens to take stock of a situation that had already assumed grave possibilities.

On 16th April, the Naval, Military and Air Force Commanders-in-Chief met in conference on board Admiral Cunningham's flagship. The decision was taken to withdraw the troops from Greece. The collapse of Yugoslavia and the overwhelming of the Greek left wing, the inadequacy of the air forces to meet the ceaselessly reinforced bombing onslaught, the lack of good supply ports since the destruction of the Piraeus—all these factors contributed to make this resolve inevitable.

The operation, one of the most intricate and difficult ever undertaken by land and sea forces, required swift organisation and inter-service planning. It was ultimately decided to commence the evacuation on 28th April. But the Army was now falling back under a practically unopposed and continuous air attack. On 21st April, the Greek Army in the Epirus capitulated. The date for the evacuation was moved forward to the night of the 24th. The momentum of the German mechanised advance was such that it was evident that the entire embarkation would have to be carried out within the next three or four days. Estimates of numbers to be withdrawn varied; most were in the region of 50,000.

Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman was placed

in charge of the embarkation operations in Greece. Major-General E. C. Weston, Royal Marines, sent to establish a Royal Marine unit at Suda Bay, found himself senior officer ashore and took command of all British forces in Crete. Vice-Admiral H. D. Pridham-Wippell, C.V.O., Second-in-Command, Mediterranean Fleet, with his light forces based on Suda Bay, commanded operations afloat. All available cruisers and destroyers were sent into the Aegean to act under his orders. The Greek Admiralty offered all of the Greek Fleet to the British Commander-in-Chief at Alexandria, to operate as he saw fit; he accepted the offer, welcoming it.

At this sombre moment in the north, the situation looking westward from Alexandria appeared reasonably stable. Tobruk, though heavily bombed, had been reinforced with tanks by the Inshore Squadron and was holding out bravely. A daily average of 400 tons of stores was being unloaded. The little gunboats Aphis and Ladybird, everlastingly bombed, were maintaining their support of the Army's flank. The cruiser Gloucester had been sent to Malta to support the 14th Flotilla in its convoy raids, which had just resulted in the sinking of a 4,000-ton transport. Under cover of Force H at Gibraltar, reinforcements for the Fleet—the cruiser Dido, the minelayer Abdiel and five destroyers—were coming through the Western Mediterranean. The Ark Royal was carrying more Hurricanes to Malta. The submarine Regent, having entered the Gulf of Kotor to embark the British Minister to Yugoslavia, found it in enemy hands and escaped, after a dive-bombing attack, by diving and navigating the gulf submerged.

Such were the principal events crowding those fateful hours. The right claw of the crab was stopped on the frontier. Nothing more could be done in the west. The left-hand claw was penetrating Greece ever more deeply; and in the Aegean the Navy set its face towards the appointed task.

2. Fifty Thousand Men by Night

24th APRIL—30th APRIL, 1941

THE SITUATION confronting Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman in Greece changed from hour to hour and was intermittently obscure. Certain main features, however, quickly emerged and governed the course of events. The German advance had obliterated the few Greek airfields and reduced the effective strength of the Royal Air Force to negligible proportions. The immense German air superiority was used to the full in unrelenting mass attacks upon the retreating armies, upon the roads along which supplies reached them, upon towns, harbours and shipping. On 21st and 22nd April, massed air attacks on shipping destroyed 23 vessels, including two hospital ships and a destroyer. Magnetic minelaying, following the disastrous explosion of the ammunition in the *Clan Fraser* on 6th April after she had been struck by a bomb, closed the Piraeus as a port. On the 24th, the last Royal Air Force fighters in Greece were destroyed.

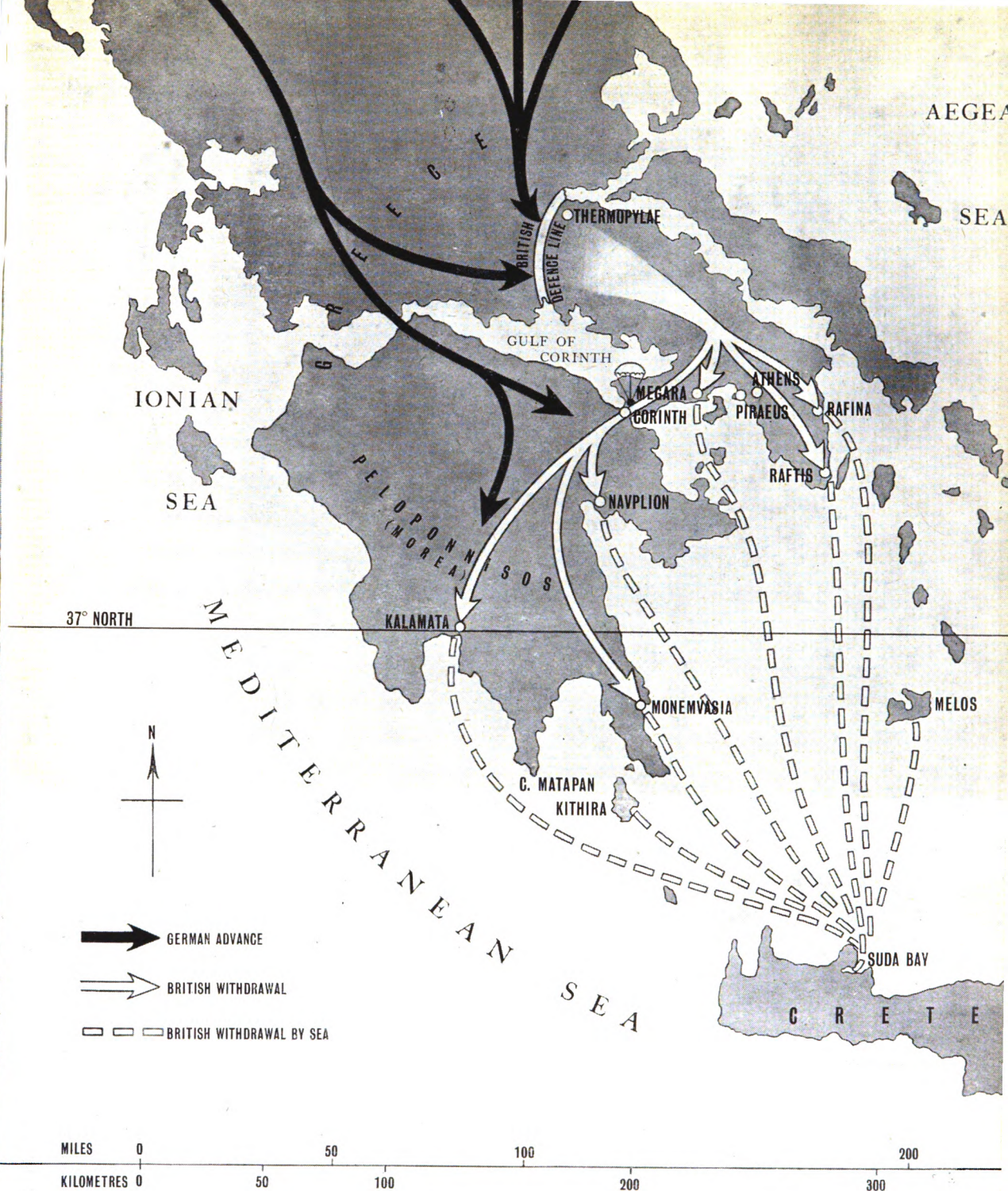
The unreliability of wireless in the mountains of the interior made communication uncertain between the Army and the embarkation headquarters at Athens. Language difficulties and casualties among the staff as a result of the unrelenting bombing were obstacles to co-operation with local authorities; but they were overcome somehow. Few people could have continued to function through what their country had undergone, and was then undergoing, as

did the Greeks. Men, women and children cheered the troops as they came through Athens in retreat, knowing that nothing now awaited them but starvation, oppression, death maybe. "You will come back!" they cried. "We know how to wait."

In all this there was one salient feature: the German mastery of the air. It meant not only that the withdrawal must be carried out at night, but that troops and transports could approach the embarkation points only after darkness. With the assistance of the Greek Admiralty the shores of Morea and Attica were hastily reconnoitred for suitable beaches: the factors governing selection being that they should be linked with the interior by roads along which troops could march in large numbers, and that they should afford some shelter or facilities for a rushed embarkation into lighters and boats. Six were finally chosen. In order from north-east to south-west, they were Rafina, Raftis, Megara, Navplion, Monemvasia and Kalamata.

Once the beaches were selected and their position communicated to the Army, the problem of diverting the columns withdrawing under overwhelming pressure, each to its allotted beach in prearranged strength, was one of enormous complexity. It was brought to a successful conclusion. The troops, mostly tired men who had been fighting a rearguard action under continuous bombing for weeks, bore themselves with calm and patience: this was not only at the points of embarkation, but in all the unfamiliar and overcrowded conditions in which they were transported.

Under the general direction of Rear-Admiral G. H. Creswell, D.S.O., D.S.C., in charge of the naval base at Alexandria, beach-masters and beach parties were sent to Greece to augment those provided from H.M.S. *York*, which was still aground at Suda Bay after being torpedoed on 25th March by a one-man, high-speed dinghy that penetrated the defences. All available shipping that could be used as transports,



THE LIFT FROM GREECE. Six beaches were chosen for the evacuation of Greece—Rafina, Raftis, Megara, Navplion, Monemvasia and Kalamata. German mastery of the air enforced a night approach by the warships and transports and a night embarkation. Before daylight the ships had to reach such cover as the R.A.F. could arrange from Crete. The parallel of 37° N. was taken as the safety line. Of the 50,662 men withdrawn from the six beaches, the Navy brought 50,162 to safety.



THE RETURN FROM GREECE

both British and Allied, and a number of A-lighters—flat-bottomed tank landing craft—were despatched in convoy to Suda Bay, where they were diverted to the embarkation points.

Owing to the persistence of attacks from the air, ships had to be, by daylight, within range of such fighter protection as the Royal Air Force was able to afford from Crete, and, as far as practicable, outside the range of Ju. 87s. The parallel of 37° N. was taken as a safety line.

The evacuation commenced on the night of 24th–25th April from Raftis, Megara and Navplion.

The ships detailed for Raftis were the anti-aircraft cruiser *Calcutta*, the corvette *Salvia* and the transport *Glengyle*. They groped their way inshore in pitch darkness and between them they cleared the place of 5,700 men by 4 a.m. and conveyed them to Suda Bay in safety.

The s.s. *Thurland Castle* arrived at Megara at 10 p.m., transferred six lighters to the water, embarked 100 nursing sisters and 3,500 troops of whom 1,000 were wounded, hoisted her lighters and was heading for the open sea by 3 a.m. She was frequently bombed and holed by near-misses. She reached Suda Bay with six feet of water in her hold, but no one had been hurt during the voyage.

The cruiser *Phoebe*, the Australian destroyers *Stuart* and *Voyager*, the corvette *Hyacinth* and the transports *Glenearn* and *Ulster Prince* proceeded to Navplion. The *Glenearn* was dive-bombed on the way and part of her fore-castle removed by the explosion. She also caught fire, and had to stop stern to wind while the fire was extinguished. In spite of the delay, she reached Navplion in time to embark 5,100 men, including two prisoners, whose captors clung grimly to them to the last. Matters were not made easier when, owing to a difficult approach, the *Ulster Prince* ran aground in the fairway. Efforts by the *Hyacinth* to tow her off were useless, and

she was finally abandoned. Next day the Germans found and finished her off with bombs.

In the meanwhile, the embarkation of troops in the remaining ships proceeded. Using caiques and lighters to transport them, the *Phoebe* took 1,130, the *Voyager* 340, including 260 nursing sisters, and the *Hyacinth* found room for 113. The *Stuart* remained empty to be available as a rescue ship should one be required during the passage to Suda Bay. While the *Voyager* was embarking the nursing sisters, one, burdened with her equipment, fell overboard between the destroyer and the caïque, where she was in danger of being crushed between the two, if not drowned outright. An Australian ordinary seaman dived into the water and supported her till a line could be passed down and they were both hauled to safety.

Next day, 25th April, the Vice-Admiral, Second-in-Command, arrived at Suda Bay in H.M.S. *Orion*. From the information Rear-Admiral Baillie-Grohman was able to supply, there appeared to be a further 5,000 men to be embarked from Megara that night.

The s.s. *Pennland* and the s.s. *Thurland Castle*, patched up sufficiently to enable her to do the trip, set out to lift them, escorted by the A.A. cruiser *Coventry* and five destroyers. On the way the *Pennland* was twice attacked by bombers and finally sunk. The *Griffin*, one of the escorting destroyers, brought the crew back to Suda Bay. Three more destroyers were despatched to take the *Pennland's* place. Between them they brought back 6,000 men.

It must be recalled that these and all future embarkations were invariably carried out in pitch darkness, often in rough seas, or on unknown coasts with charts that were not always reliable; conflicting rumours from the shore as to the whereabouts of the enemy and the presence of mines contributed an element of uncertainty. Moreover, surface attack on these convoys by the Italian

Fleet, which from its base at Taranto could reach Greece in twelve hours, was always a possibility. That no attack did in fact materialise was probably because the Italian Fleet, still licking its wounds after Matapan, was content to leave matters to the unopposed Luftwaffe.

The numbers to be embarked on one night reached their peak on the night of 26th-27th April, when 27,000 men were distributed between Rafina, Raftis, Navplion and Kalamata waiting to be taken off.

The transport *Glengyle* with three destroyers and the *Salween* with the cruiser *Carlisle* and two destroyers were sent to Rafina and Raftis respectively; the transports *Slamat*, *Khediye Ismail*, *Glenearn*, with *H.M.S. Calcutta* and five destroyers to Navplion, and the three transports, *Dilwara*, *City of London* and *Costa Rica*, escorted by the *Phoebe* and four destroyers to Kalamata. Eight thousand two hundred were lifted from Rafina and Raftis, 4,500 from Navplion, 9,000 from Kalamata, a total of nearly 22,000. The *Glenearn* was hit on the way to Navplion. Her engine room flooded, and she was towed by the *Griffin* to Crete. The absence of this transport, and especially of her lighters, seriously reduced the numbers that could be taken off; eventually, although the Second-in-Command proceeded to the Gulf of Navplion in the *Orion*, with the Australian ships *Perth* and *Stuart*, to remedy the situation, several thousand men had to be left ashore due to lack of boats.

Here tragedy began to pile on tragedy. The time factor was of vital importance, and 3 a.m. was set as the latest time ships should leave Navplion to enable them to be beyond bombing range by daylight. For various reasons, however, the convoy was not able to sail till 4.15 a.m., and the force did not get clear of the Gulf of Navplion till 6 a.m. An hour later the Germans commenced their attack with about 30 dive-bombers. The Dutch *Slamat*, packed with troops, was hit, set on fire and thereafter

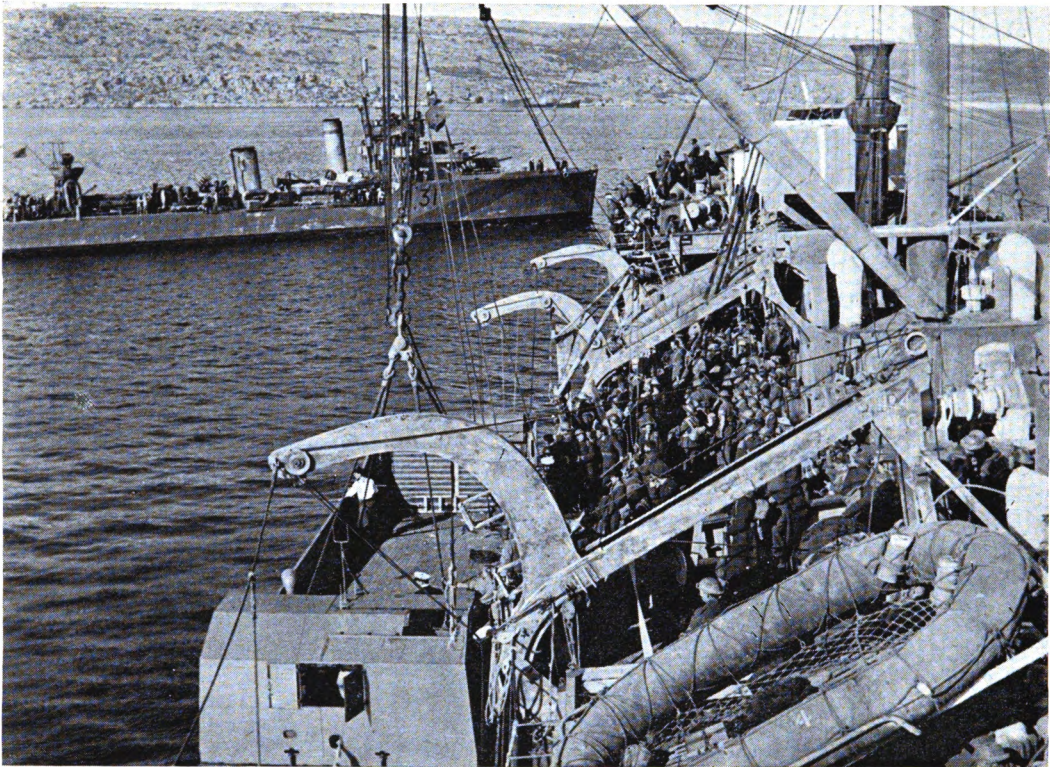
repeatedly bombed and machine-gunned. The *Calcutta* hustled the rest of the convoy south, out of the danger zone; the destroyers *Diamond* and *Wryneck* were despatched to the *Slamat*'s assistance and picked up all the survivors who could be found.

The *Diamond*, with about 600 troops on board, finally torpedoed and sank the abandoned and blazing *Slamat*, and was then herself sunk by a succession of heavy bombs. Her consort the *Wryneck* met the same fate a few minutes later. By 2 p.m. the drone of the bombers' engines died away. The *Slamat*, *Diamond* and *Wryneck* had disappeared.

When the *Slamat* and her escort failed to arrive at their expected time at Suda Bay, the Second-in-Command grew anxious and despatched the *Griffin* to search for them. At 2.30 a.m. on 28th April, the *Griffin* found about 50 survivors on rafts and brought them back to Crete. A damaged whaler from the *Wryneck* with 23 men, in the charge of a wounded warrant engineer, succeeded in reaching Ananes Rock at 4 p.m. on 28th, having paddled and drifted 40 miles. Here they fell in with some army officers and Greek refugees who had escaped in a caique. With the whaler in tow, they managed to reach Suda Bay on the morning of 29th April. The senior surviving rating of the *Wryneck* made a report which concluded: "The men from the *Wryneck* wish me to add that we have lost a fine ship, fine officers and a magnificent captain."

H.M.S. Calcutta's convoy was overtaken by bombers on the afternoon of the 27th and the *Costa Rica* was sunk, but all her troops and crew were rescued by the destroyer escort and landed at Suda.

At dawn on the morning of the 26th, a strong force of German parachutists descended on the Corinth Canal after an intense aerial bombardment and captured the road and rail bridge. This cut off Morea from the rest of Greece, but fortunately the Allied Headquarters had been moved at midnight to a valley in the Gulf of Navplion.



THE DANGEROUS PASSAGE OVER, soldiers and airmen from Greece arrive in Suda Bay. Slung alongside the transport is a landing craft used to carry men between beach and ship. In the foreground is an oval-shaped Carley float. The destroyer formed part of the transport's escort.

In consequence of the situation, Athens radio closed down an hour or two later with a valedictory signal to Malta and Alexandria. The heartbreak cannot quite be disguised, nor can it quench the fire of the Hellenic spirit :

"Last night with you—Happy days with victory and liberty—God with you and for you. Good luck."

Malta, battered and indomitable, made reply :

"Very grateful for your message. The Medes and the Persians could not make it. How shall the modern Attila ?"

"We shall not forget you," flickered back the Alexandria Station, *"and look forward to the day of freedom."* Then silence closed down on Athens.

There remained nearly 5,000 men still waiting to be picked up from Rafina and Raftis. This force included the rearguard formed by the 4th New Zealand Brigade. Fortunately the enemy had not discovered their presence, and on the night of 27th–28th April, the cruiser Ajax and the three destroyers Kingston, Kimberley and Havock lifted the entire party without incident.

On the night of the 28th–29th, arrangements had been made to embark the last parties from Kalamata and Monemvasia. The military, diplomatic and Greek members of the Headquarters Staff had already withdrawn to Crete, but Admiral Baillie-Grohman transferred to Monemvasia, on which point General Freyberg and the New

Zealanders were retiring. They arrived on the night of the 27th, and took cover during daylight ; from the concealment of an olive grove, while enemy reconnaissance aircraft quartered the countryside in search of them, the Rear-Admiral wrote to the Commander-in-Chief : " The Army organisation in rear of beaches, and the discipline of the troops, are magnificent—especially considering they have been fighting a rearguard action from Salonika almost to Matapan."

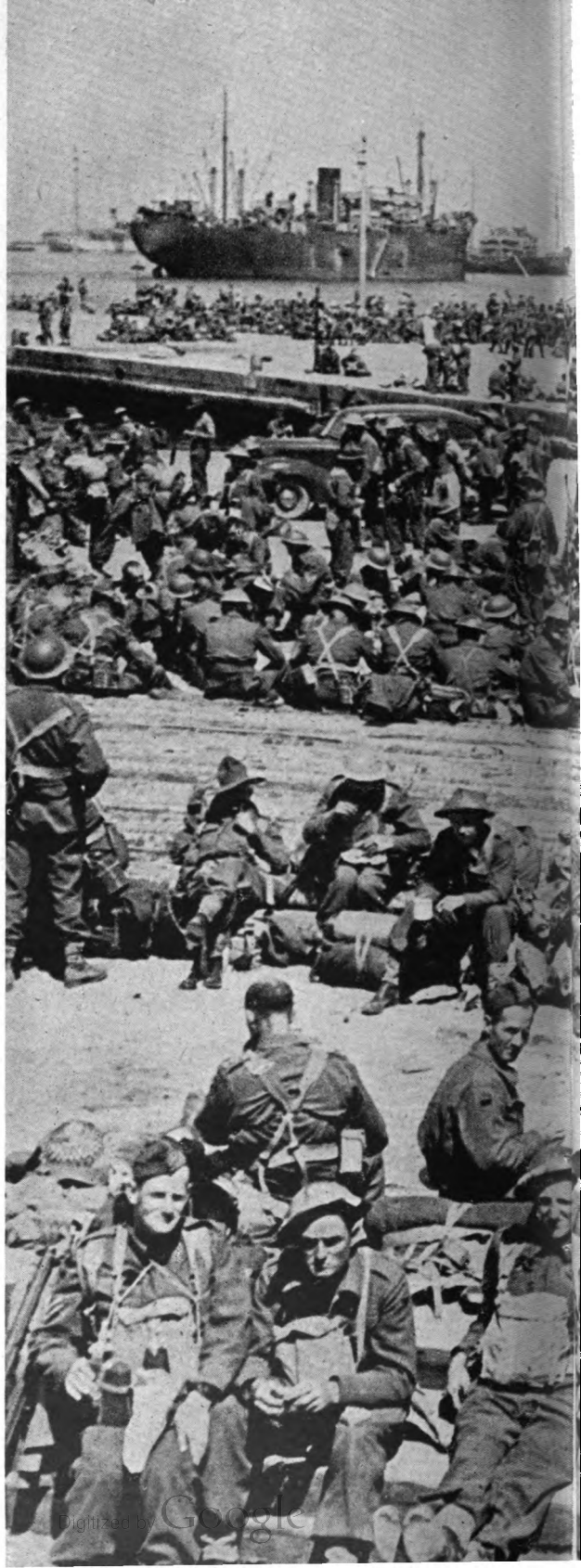
H.M.S. Ajax with four destroyers, embarked 4,300 men at Monemvasia, while from the island of Kithira three corvettes lifted another 1,000. Having accomplished all that was in their power and lifted every man, Admiral Baillie-Grohman and General Freyberg finally embarked in the Ajax and, at 3.45 a.m. on the 29th, proceeded to Suda Bay.

It was estimated on the morning of the 28th that there were 7,000 men still at Kalamata. Of these about 1,200 were fighting units, the remainder being Royal Army Service Corps, Cyprian and Palestinian Pioneers and 1,500 Yugoslav refugees. The cruisers Perth and Phoebe and six destroyers were sent to embark this force, but on arrival about 9 p.m., news was received from shore that the Germans had occupied the town and that the harbour was mined. The Perth accordingly withdrew, and the attempt to withdraw the last remnants of the army in Greece was frustrated.

About 500 of these escaped from the town and were later picked up from beaches and islands by destroyers searching in the darkness for the last possible stragglers. On the night of 30th April, the Hotspur and Havock discovered 700 British and Palestinian troops on the island of Melos and took them all off.

The total number withdrawn from the

THE LIFT IS ENDED. United Kingdom and New Zealand troops crowd off the transports that have carried them to Alexandria. The lift from Greece took six nights. By 30th April, the withdrawal was over.





shores of Greece was 50,662, of which 50,162 were brought into safety. The only Army losses incurred were those in the Slammat.

Now that the evacuation was over, the Second-in-Command was chiefly concerned with the withdrawal from Crete of all forces not able to take part in its defence—prisoners, distressed seamen and wounded—that were already a heavy drain on the island's resources. The *Delane*, *Thurland Castle*, *Comliebank*, *Corinthia*, *Itria*, *Ionia*, and the oiler *Brambleleaf*, sailed in convoy with 11,000 troops on board. They were covered by the cruiser squadron and screening destroyers and escorted by the A.A. cruiser *Carlisle*, a corvette and five destroyers. At 6.30 a.m. the 1st Battle Squadron and the *Formidable* took over close escort of the convoy and guarded them to Alexandria. The Second-in-Command, his task done, went on ahead in the *Orion* with the *Ajax*.

The *Ajax*'s report concludes: "Amongst the troops embarked were officers and men from the 19th and 24th New Zealand Battalions, both of which had been taken from Alexandria to Piraeus by the *Ajax* two months earlier, and the fact that they knew the ship helped in the smooth organisation as well as raising the spirit of the troops who counted the ship as an old friend."

Here the relationship between Navy and Army in such a campaign is epitomised. The Navy's own attitude is perhaps adequately summed up by the captain of the *Isis*, who ends his report with: "I am proud to command such a fine body of men who, fully realising the gravity of the situation and of the tasks they were called upon to perform, carried them out in a spirit of gay adventure."

The men they brought off had had the gaiety blasted out of them by high explosives, fatigue and disappointment. But their bearing was the admiration of all who had to do with them; not least when they climbed stiffly on to the crowded decks, burdened with full equipment, a sprig of wild sage or rosemary between their teeth.

3. The Battle of Crete Begins

1st MAY—20th MAY, 1941

IT WAS AT THE END of April that the Fleet returned to Alexandria with the last convoy of troops from Greece. It was a rather tired Fleet, conscious that it had done all that had been asked of it, and grateful for a brief respite before the hardest fighting of the war.

The operations of March and April had exposed its ships to unremitting air attack and was subjecting the light forces to a gradually mounting strain and fatigue. There was no let-up for officers or men, except the few hours in harbour fuelling between escorting convoys, or ammunitioning between fights against the bombers that swarmed over the Aegean from the Dodecanese and later the Grecian airfields.

By day and night gun crews and lookouts lived at the maximum tension of vigilance. Engine room staffs nursed their overdriven machinery like anxious seconds plying sponge and towel, patching up a battered champion to stick it for another round. Captains and navigators and defence officers were afraid of dozing off on their feet, betrayed by the weary flesh into a treacherous moment of oblivion. The anti-aircraft cruisers had worn smooth the rifling of their gun barrels; the destroyers, after the embarkations from the beaches of Attica and the Peloponnisos, had no boats left.

Even their brief respite at Alexandria was not to be unbroken. A large and important convoy had left the United Kingdom bringing out tanks and mechanised transport for the Army of the Nile. It was escorted by reinforcements for the Fleet—the battleship

Queen Elizabeth and the cruisers Naiad and Fiji—and on 6th May, the Commander-in-Chief took the Fleet to sea to cover the passage of the convoy through the central Mediterranean. Advantage was taken of the cover of powerful forces to pass a convoy into Malta, and another into Suda Bay with defence equipment and a force of Royal Marines.

On the way, the cruiser Ajax and three destroyers were detached to bombard Benghazi. This they did early on the morning of 8th May. When proceeding to rejoin the Fleet they encountered two enemy supply ships of 3,000 and 6,000 tons close inshore. The destroyers Havock, Hotspur and Imperial disposed of them in swift sequence. The Imperial reported observing a motor lorry pass over the ship when her target blew up.

In addition to the reinforcements escorting the convoy, Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten, G.C.V.O., D.S.O., R.N., in the Kelly with the 5th Destroyer Flotilla—Kashmir, Kelvin, Kipling and Jackal—had arrived at Malta some time earlier to operate against the enemy convoys to Tripoli. They had joined the Fleet during the passage of the convoy and were detached on the way to repeat the bombardment of Benghazi.

The convoy—one of the largest and most important that had been brought through the Mediterranean from the west—made a part of the dangerous voyage under cover of a fog. In these waters at this time of the year such a phenomenon is so unusual as to invest the proceedings with a touch of the miraculous. The Fleet was repeatedly but unavailingly attacked by formations of enemy aircraft. The convoy was brought safely to Alexandria on 12th May. It was, in the words of an Admiralty telegram congratulating the Commander-in-Chief, a “memorable achievement.”

Meanwhile, to the north, the clouds gathered.

The German thrust through the Balkans and Greece had halted at Cape Matapan,

70 miles from Crete. Almost before the British rearguard had embarked, the Germans, with the forced labour of prisoners and Greek peasants, were feverishly levelling airfields.

It was apparent that an attack on Crete was imminent; what was expected was a combined sea and airborne landing, supported by the entire weight of the Italian Fleet and the German and Italian air forces. To defend the island against such an attack the Army required the co-operation of the Air Force to provide strong fighter protection, and the co-operation of the Navy to destroy the enemy's troop convoys. For reasons beyond the control of the R.A.F. in the Middle East, fighter protection was not available. The support of the Army in Crete thus became what is popularly known as a job for the Navy.

Admiral Cunningham accordingly made his dispositions and on 15th May, three days after returning to Alexandria with the convoy of tanks for the Army, naval forces were at sea to the south of Crete ready to move to any threatened point.

On 22nd April, Major-General E. C. Weston, Royal Marines, had been sent to Crete to take over command of all British troops on the island, to which were now added the 25,000 British, Dominion and other troops that were in process of withdrawing there from Greece (the other 25,000 were taken to Egypt). His first task was to divide them into camps. These camps formed the basis for subsequent tactical dispositions.

On 30th April, Major-General Freyberg arrived and assumed command as G.O.C., Crete. General Weston then took over the defence of the Suda sector, garrisoned by a mixed force of Royal Marines, British, Australian and Greek troops, and a small force of naval ratings. General Weston was also placed in command of all coast and A.A. artillery.

The disposition of the remainder of General Freyberg's forces and the part they played



THE PALL OVER SUDA. Blackening the whole sky, supply ships with stores for the Crete garrison burn furiously in Suda Bay. The German air force gave the small naval base an appal-

in subsequent events ashore are described only in so far as they help to explain a protracted naval action, during which the fortunes of the Army and Navy were so closely interwoven.

Suda Bay was chosen as his headquarters by Captain J. A. V. Morse, D.S.O., R.N., when he assumed charge of the naval base on 23rd April. It was in peace time a

small coasting port with a single stone pier, dealing with a few hundred tons of cargo per month. Suda and Heraklion, where Captain M. H. S. Macdonald, D.S.O., O.B.E., R.N., was in charge, were the only two ports through which supplies, ammunition and reinforcements could reach the island. There were numbers of beaches on the south coast, but there was no access



ling hammering as the prelude to invasion in May. In the centre is the cruiser York, lying aground ; she was torpedoed in March by a one-man high-speed dinghy that penetrated the defences.

by road except at Selinos Kastelli and Timbaki. Even here mule transport was required for five or six miles ; and all mules had been requisitioned by the Greek Army for the campaign in Greece.

To transform the little port of Suda into a centre from which to feed and maintain an army of 25,000 men distributed over a mountainous country ; to unload ships with

no facilities but what they had on board, and get them to sea again under ceaseless bombing attacks ; to disperse the cargoes away from the dangers of fire and bomb destruction without cranes, transit sheds or sorting areas ; to conjure transport out of a small, poor island that had already been raked over by the requisitionings of the Greek Army during its desperate repulse of the Italian invaders—

these were some of the problems that confronted the Captain-in-Charge and his handful of assistants at the outset of their task.

During the first half of May, the enemy air forces concentrated upon bombing ships unloading in Suda harbour, in an endeavour to prevent stores and equipment from reaching the garrison. As attacks increased in number and violence, the local peasant labour employed in unloading ships at Suda dwindled. Lack of stevedores was added to the Captain-in-Charge's anxieties. Finally, the New Zealand Brigade furnished a dock company. Of all the New Zealanders' achievements in the battle that was to follow, none was finer or more courageous than the work of these voluntary stevedores who went on unloading until the bombs were actually falling on them, and then took cover reluctantly. When the invasion commenced, these valiant men joined General Weston's force in the defence of the Suda sector.

The German invasion of Crete began on the morning of 20th May.

It had been preceded by an appalling hammering of the island from the new German airfields in Greece. Intense attacks were launched against the R.A.F. fighters on the airfields at Maleme and Heraklion. There were no reinforcements of aircraft or crews then available in Egypt, and bases in Libya were too far away to give fighter support. It was decided to evacuate the Maleme and Heraklion airfields. By 19th May the evacuation had been concluded.

The Germans then turned their attention to the crews of the A.A. batteries guarding the airfields, Maleme being subjected to a bombardment which reached a dreadful climax at 7 a.m. the next morning, the day of the invasion.

By 8 a.m., when all gun crews had been incapacitated or driven into trench cover, convoys of gliders, escorted by fighters and dive bombers, arrived. Three companies landed at Maleme, a fourth south of Canea, and a fifth on the Akrotiri Peninsula. Low-

altitude bombing and machine-gunning of trenches went on ceaselessly during these landings, keeping the defenders pinned to the ground.

At Maleme, forty to fifty gliders were used in the invasion. The majority crash-landed in the bed of the gully west of the airfield, out of the direct line of fire from the defenders. Before action could be taken against them, the attackers had reached positions on the high ground to the west, overlooking the airfield. In the Canea area, similar surprise tactics secured an initial success. The gun crews were killed or driven underground by devastating bombing and machine-gunning, while the gliders landed practically unperceived. At Akrotiri Peninsula the air support which the Germans expected failed to materialise. Some of the gliders became unhooked over the sea and dropped into it. A number crashed violently on landing, killing or disabling the occupants; several were shot down. The remainder were surrounded as they landed and the occupants killed or captured.

This initial surprise assault was the role assigned to the gliders. They were followed a quarter of an hour later by parachutists.

At Maleme, some descended south and east of the airfield and were rapidly wiped out. Those who landed to the west of the airfield were protected by the covering fire of the glider troops and collected themselves into a strong force which by the afternoon had killed or wounded all the defenders of the western edge of the airfield. During the afternoon a second wave of parachutists landed, this time at Retimo and Heraklion. Large numbers were killed on landing and by the evening the position in these areas was well in hand.

The situation by the end of the day was, on the whole, not unsatisfactory. Some 750 glider shock troops and 8,000 parachutists had been landed. At Maleme the western side of the airfield was in German hands; but in the Canea, Retimo and Heraklion areas parachute landings had



INVASION FROM THE AIR. The German parachute landing at Heraklion is in progress, and a troop carrier has been hit by A.A. gunners. Below the long wake of smoke, parachute troops swing to earth.



Swiftly losing height and with flames pouring from it, the troop carrier plunges over the crest of the hill to crash. The first parachute troops have landed. *Below*, a fresh wave of parachutists descends from another troop carrier. A pillar of smoke marks the end of the crashed aircraft.



THE BATTLE OF CRETE: 20th MAY—1st JUNE, 1941

G R E E C E

G. OF
NAVLION

C Y C

PELOPONNISOS
(MOREA)

G. OF
KALAMATA

MELOS

C. MATAPAN

KITHIRA

22 MAY. The destroyer
GREYHOUND sunk by
air attack

22 MAY. The cruiser GLOUCESTER
sunk by air attack while assisting
the GREYHOUND

ANTI-KITHIRA



21 MAY. Invasion Convoy
destroyed by Rear-Admiral
Glennie's Force

24 & 26 MAY. The
minelayer ABDIEL
escorted by the
destroyers HERO
and NIZAM lands re-
inforcements at Suda

22 MAY. 5th Destroyer Flotilla
bombards MALEME where Germans
are landing by air

AKROTIRI
PENINSULA

20-21 MAY. Battle Fleet
in area west of Crete to
repel any intervention by
Italian Battle Fleet

MALEME
SELINOS
KASTELLI

CANEA

SUDA
BAY

SFAKIA

RETIMO

PLAKA BAY

TIMBAKI

**MAIN EVACUATION
BEACHES**

28 MAY- Force lifted & brought
1 JUNE. safely to Alexandria

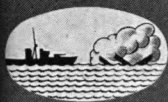
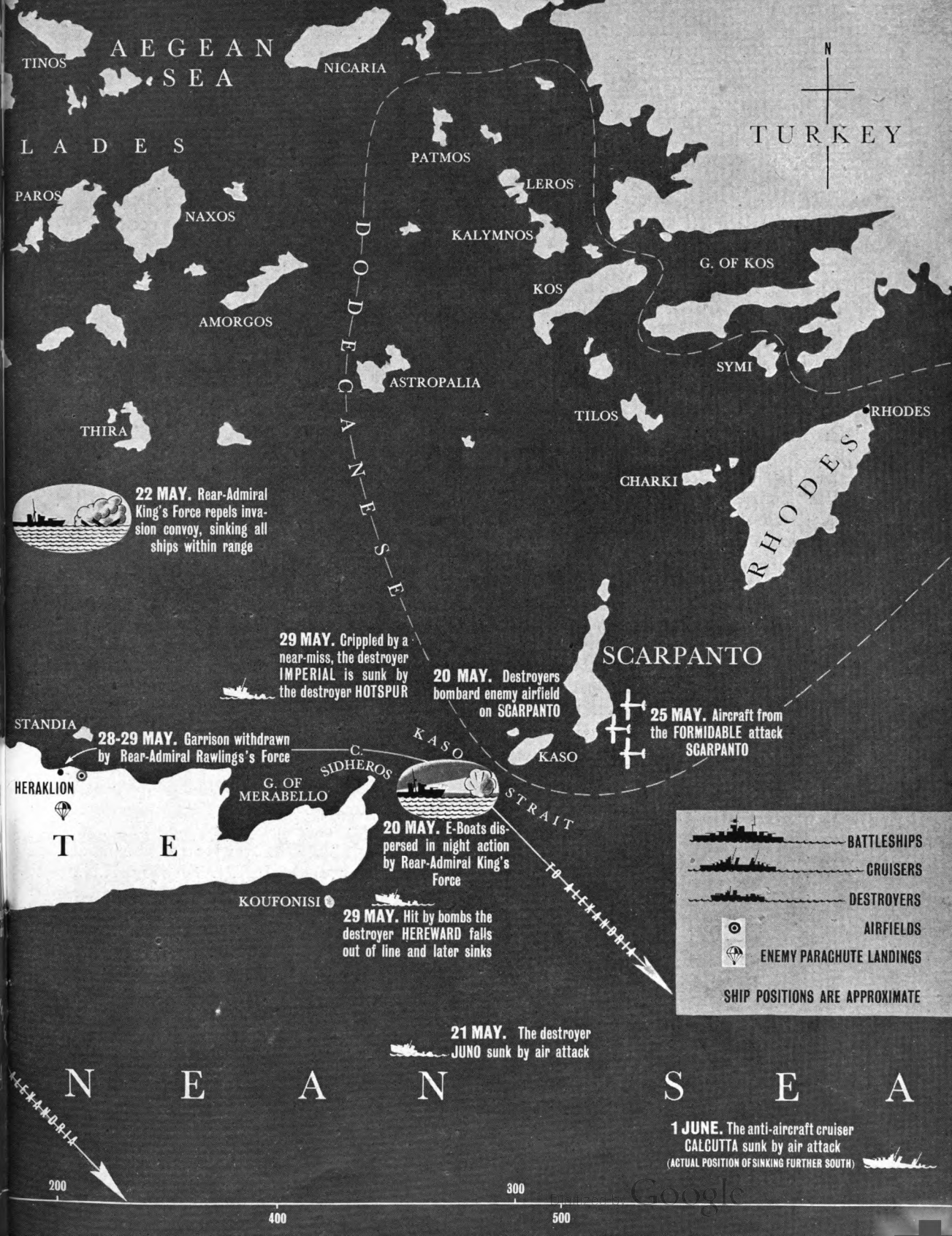
22 MAY. The cruiser
FIDI abandoned in sinking
condition after bomb hits

GAVDOPULA

GAVDHOS

22 MAY. The destroyers
KASHMIR and KELLY sunk
by air attack

M E D I T E R R A



22 MAY. Rear-Admiral King's Force repels invasion convoy, sinking all ships within range



29 MAY. Crippled by a near-miss, the destroyer IMPERIAL is sunk by the destroyer HOTSPUR



20 MAY. Destroyers bombard enemy airfield on SCARPANTO



25 MAY. Aircraft from the FORMIDABLE attack SCARPANTO

STANDIA
HERAKLION

28-29 MAY. Garrison withdrawn by Rear-Admiral Rawlings's Force

G. OF MERABELLO

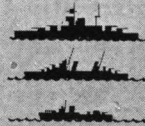
20 MAY. E-Boats dispersed in night action by Rear-Admiral King's Force



29 MAY. Hit by bombs the destroyer HEReward falls out of line and later sinks



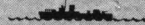
21 MAY. The destroyer JUNO sunk by air attack



BATTLESHIPS



CRUISERS



DESTROYERS



AIRFIELDS



ENEMY PARACHUTE LANDINGS

SHIP POSITIONS ARE APPROXIMATE



1 JUNE. The anti-aircraft cruiser CALCUTTA sunk by air attack (ACTUAL POSITION OF SINKING FURTHER SOUTH)

failed to achieve their object, and heavy casualties had been sustained by the invaders.

Towards evening, air reconnaissance having reported the presence of caiques in the Aegean, the Naval Commander-in-Chief despatched a light force to the north-west of Crete. It consisted of the cruisers Naiad and Perth, and the destroyers Kandahar, Nubian, Kingston and Juno, under the command of Rear-Admiral E. L. S. King, C.B., M.V.O. Passing through the Kaso Strait to the east of Crete in the darkness, a force of six E-boats was sighted by the Juno. Failing in her attempt to ram the nearest, the Juno engaged them with machine-gun fire. Four were damaged but they escaped in the darkness. That same night, the destroyers Jervis, Nizam and Ilex bombarded the enemy airfield at Scarpanto in the Dodecanese, one of the principal enemy air bases for the attack on Crete. They then attached themselves to the cruisers.

Besides Admiral King's squadron, a powerful force under Rear-Admiral H. B. Rawlings, O.B.E., consisting of the battleships Warspite and Valiant, screened by eight destroyers, lay to the west of Crete on the lookout for the expected intervention by the Italian Fleet.

Rear-Admiral I. G. Glennie with the cruisers Dido, Ajax and Orion and four destroyers, was searching the south coast of Greece. Another cruiser force, consisting of the Gloucester and Fiji, was patrolling west of Crete.

No further incidents occurred at sea that night.

On the morning of 21st May, more parachutists were dropped in the Canea area, but the situation remained well in hand. At Retimo, Australian and Greek troops drove the enemy out of the defended area round the airfield. At Heraklion, most of the remnants of the enemy were mopped up, the survivors retreating to the hills.

Maleme, however, remained the storm centre. Ignoring the losses caused by fire

from our positions to the eastward and south-eastward of the airfield, single troop-carrying aircraft arrived and landed in a steady stream. The bombers systematically searched out and battered into silence the batteries and machine-gun positions: fighters quartered every square yard of ground, flying as low as 50 feet, viciously spraying every movement with machine-gun and cannon fire. Under a pall of dust and smoke, the enemy gradually reinforced and extended their positions. By the evening the troop carriers were landing on the airfield three at a time with the regularity of suburban trains in the rush hours.

4. Naked Under Heaven

21st MAY—23rd MAY, 1941

FROM DAYLIGHT on 21st May, the Fleet became aware of the fury of the German air attacks that were to be its ordeal. The battle fleet was attacked once during the forenoon and for two and a half hours during the afternoon. Admiral King's squadron was bombed continuously from 9.50 a.m. for four hours. The destroyer Juno, commanded by Commander St. J. R. J. Tyrwhitt, R.N., was hit by bombs about 1 p.m. and the after boiler room and the engine room were blown open to the sea. A third bomb detonated the after magazine. She broke in half and sank in 60 seconds. A petty officer, Edwin Lumley, blown over the side from his gun by the explosion and badly burned, swam 40 yards into the thick layer of floating oil fuel to rescue a shipmate in difficulties. The Kandahar, Nubian and Kingston between them rescued six officers and 91 ratings.

The attacks were practically incessant. Several bombers were shot down, but nobody had time to count them.

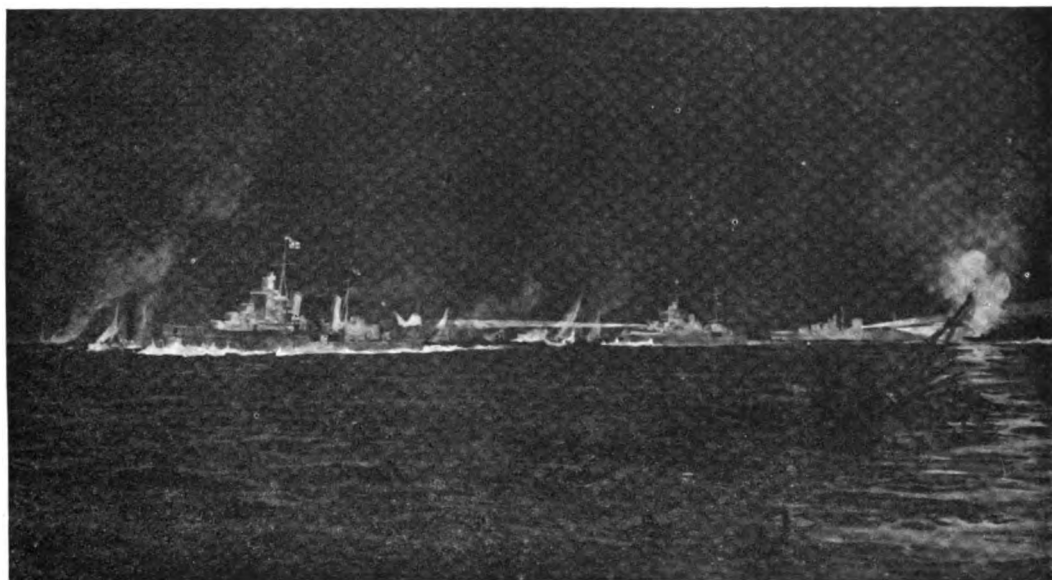
Admiral Glennie's cruisers were heavily attacked during the forenoon and the Ajax damaged by near-misses. After two and a half hours of bombing during the afternoon, they were again attacked in the evening.

In this and subsequent bombings, every form of attack was made on the ships: high level, single and formation; massed bombing by Junkers 87s and 88s and Heinkel 111s; high-speed horizontal attacks by Messerschmitts, or shallow dives at a height of a few hundred feet; torpedo attacks at dusk. Aircraft returned to their adjoining airfields, bombed up, ammunitioned, refuelled and returned independently to the attack.

There is no spot more naked under heaven than the deck of a destroyer as a stick of bombs falls slanting towards it. The assailant may be the size of a gnat on the rim of a far-off cloud; it may be a raid

approaching from four quarters, roaring down with machine-guns and cannon spraying the decks with explosive shell; the bombs may fall unheralded out of the blinding Mediterranean sun or low-lying cloud; they may burst on the surface of the sea, flinging a myriad splinters of steel abroad, killing or wounding everybody in their path, piercing anything but armour; they may burst under the surface, throwing up the water in the semblance of gigantic monoliths that, as they collapse, deluge the pom-poms and machine-guns and their crews, and flood the ventilation trunks. These explosions lift the ship as if a giant had kicked her, wrenching the steering gear, straining frames and plates. They are called near-misses, and men, watching the bombs screaming down at the ship, thank God for them as the alternative to a direct hit.

The principal armament engages hostile aircraft directly they are sighted. The elevated muzzles of the guns seem to lick at them with hot tongues of yellow flame; the



NONE CROSSED BY SEA. As searchlights from British cruisers reveal an invasion convoy bound for Crete on the night of 21st May, destroyers dash in to the attack. Two hours later, only a few blazing wrecks remained and 4,000 German soldiers had been lost. (Painting by Lieut.-Commander Rowland Langmaid, R.N.)

blast, when each round is fired, shakes the ship as if she sobbed with rage. The shell-bursts are like grey mushrooms, springing up over the blue field of the sky, and slowly dissolving. As the assailant dives, the pom-poms open up : machine-guns and Oerlikons follow in a hard deafening stammer of sound that stuns the senses. Every eye is on the bomber as the tracers soar in long curves towards it. The bomb is released—a stick of them. They begin to fall ; they fall screaming in a hideous crescendo.

The gunlayer—the man who actually fires the gun—is of all most happy in that hour. He can concentrate on destroying the enemy with his own hands. The gun crews, look-outs, signalmen, can at least see what is going on. But there are scores of men in the engine and boiler rooms, ammunition supply parties in the magazines, fire and damage control units scattered about between decks, who see nothing and know nothing ; they can only count the revolutions as they slow or quicken, note the heel to port or starboard as the ship answers her rudder dodging the falling bombs. They listen to the unending roar of the guns above the shuddering upper deck. They wait, and in the process much is revealed to them.

A stoker petty officer in one of the destroyers that had been near-missed by a stick of seven bombs proceeded to the fore magazine flooding valve, which was on the seamen's messdeck. Here he observed an ordinary seaman, one of the local fire party, sadly contemplating the shattered crockery of his mess. His lips moved as if in prayer. "What's wrong with *you*?" demanded the petty officer, shouting above the roar of gunfire.

The lad pointed a tragic finger at the debris. "There's two bottles of pickles there, smashed on the deck. They was unopened."

"There's plenty more in the purser's store," said the petty officer. The boy nodded, inconsolable. "That's right : but if you knowed the job we had to get our

caterer to draw *this* lot." Another near-miss lifted the ship and dropped her, shuddering.

"He ain't pickle-minded," explained the ordinary seaman.

Half an hour before midnight on the 21st, Rear-Admiral Glennie's cruisers and the destroyers Janus, Kimberley, Hasty and Hereward sighted an enemy convoy of small steamers and caiques escorted by torpedo boats, 18 miles north of Canea. Besides troops, the convoy carried artillery, motor cycles, cars and light tanks.

They were first sighted by the Janus on the Dido's port bow, and one of the torpedo boats fired a couple of torpedoes at her which she avoided. The Dido raked the torpedo boat with multiple pom-poms and the Ajax blew her to pieces with a broadside. The searchlights of the cruisers illuminated an incredible scene of retribution for the pitiless bombing they had undergone all day. The destroyers hurled themselves into the attack like terriers in a rat-pit. That none of them collided as they rushed upon caïque after caïque, sinking them by ramming or gunfire, points to some nicety of ship-handling. In the words of their Admiral, they "conducted themselves with energy and zest." When, a couple of hours later, they finally withdrew to the westward only a few sinking wrecks lay blazing in the darkness. The sea invaders of Crete, to the number of about 4,000, had been annihilated.

Early next morning, 22nd May, Admiral King's squadron, strengthened the previous day by the anti-aircraft cruisers Carlisle and Calcutta, sighted another force of caiques escorted by destroyers. The cruisers had then penetrated dangerously far into the Aegean and their ammunition was running low. Air attacks were developing to a serious pitch of ferocity, and when the convoy turned back under cover of a smoke screen, Rear-Admiral King, having sunk everything within gun range, recalled his destroyers from the pursuit and withdrew westward towards the battle fleet.

From 10 a.m. till noon, the squadron was

bombed without respite. Waves of Junkers 87s swept down out of the sun and the Naiad counted 36 misses, many of them near ones, in ten minutes. Some of her compartments became flooded, which reduced her speed. Only two turrets remained in action. Half an hour later the Carlisle was hit and set on fire. Her captain, Captain T. C. Hampton, R.N., was killed. The destroyer Kingston closed her to stand by in case of need, but received a curt signal: "Keep clear of me." The Carlisle put the fires out and continued to fight back furiously. At 1.15 p.m. a torpedo attack was dodged by the Naiad. A few minutes later the battle fleet was sighted coming to their support from the westward. Both battleships were hit during the afternoon, but not seriously damaged.

The first casualty of the day was the destroyer Greyhound, returning from sinking a caique flying the Swastika flag, seen lurking off one of the islands. The Greyhound was attacked by eight dive-bombers and hit three times. The 3-inch gun continued to fire until it was wiped out by the third bomb. The 5-inch machine-guns went on firing to the last. She sank in four minutes, having launched the only boat she had left, a whaler.

The destroyers Kandahar and Kingston went to the rescue of the Greyhound's crew, supported by the gunfire of the cruisers Fiji and Gloucester. They lowered their whalers and under a savage bombing and machine-gun attack picked up a number of officers and ratings, including the Greyhound's captain, Commander W. R. Marshall-A'Deane, D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N. But staying longer meant the suicidal destruction of fighting units. They flung their Carley floats among the survivors and withdrew; and of all cups men are called upon to drink in war, there is none more bitter than this.

The Germans then concentrated on machine-gunning the swimmers and occupants of the rafts and whalers. The first

lieutenant, Lieutenant R. Scott, R.N., Lieutenant-Commander (E) R. E. G. Bremner, R.N., and Mr. J. W. Chase, Warrant Gunner (T), were killed in this way.

As the rescuers withdrew under continuous waves of attack, the cruiser Gloucester, commanded by Captain H. A. Rowley, R.N. (who was not among the survivors) was hit and hit again, and brought to a standstill, heavily on fire. The Fiji closed the Gloucester, and dropped all her floats and boats. She could do no more. The Fiji had practically no ammunition left, the Kingston and Kandahar were not much better off, and their oil fuel was running low. With heavy hearts the little force withdrew to the southward, and the Gloucester's crew, most of whom were then in the water awaiting machine-gunning, cheered them as they went.

For three hours after that, air attacks on the Fiji and her attendant destroyers never ceased. For three hours they wove their paths through near-misses and far-misses, through deluges of water and flying splinters, as if sustained by some enchantment. The Fiji had only pom-pom and machine-gun ammunition left. At 7 p.m. when the sky was overcast with low-lying cloud, a bomb struck her, flooding one boiler room and putting the compasses out of action. She listed slowly to port and for a while struggled on at reduced speed, but at last she lay stopped: the only remaining effective pom-pom continued firing while she waited for the inevitable end. Her company were not kept long in suspense. Another bomb crashed into her, bringing down the mast and tearing open the deck from end to end. Captain P. B. R. W. William-Powlett, R.N., gave the order to abandon ship and the men who had fought so good a fight obeyed calmly and cheerfully, heartened by the destroyers' promise to return after dark.

This the Kingston and Kandahar did, and spent two hours searching the vicinity; guided by the flashing of torches from the rafts, Lieutenant-Commander P. Somerville,

D.S.O., R.N., commanding the Kingston, rescued 339 officers and men from the water; the Kandahar (Commander W. G. A. Robson, R.N.,) fished out 184.

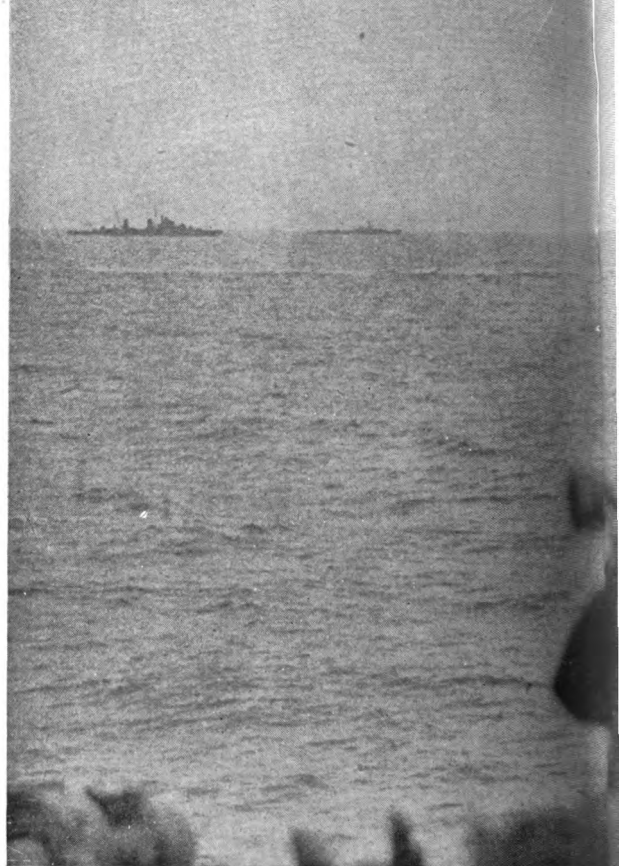
Commander Marshall-A'Deane of the sunken Greyhound had been picked up earlier in the day by the Kandahar. While the Kandahar was busy picking up men from the Fiji's rafts, Commander Marshall-A'Deane, who was helping in the rescue work, saw a man in difficulties in the water. He dived overboard and swam into the darkness to help him, and was not seen again. For this gallant attempt he was posthumously awarded the Albert Medal.

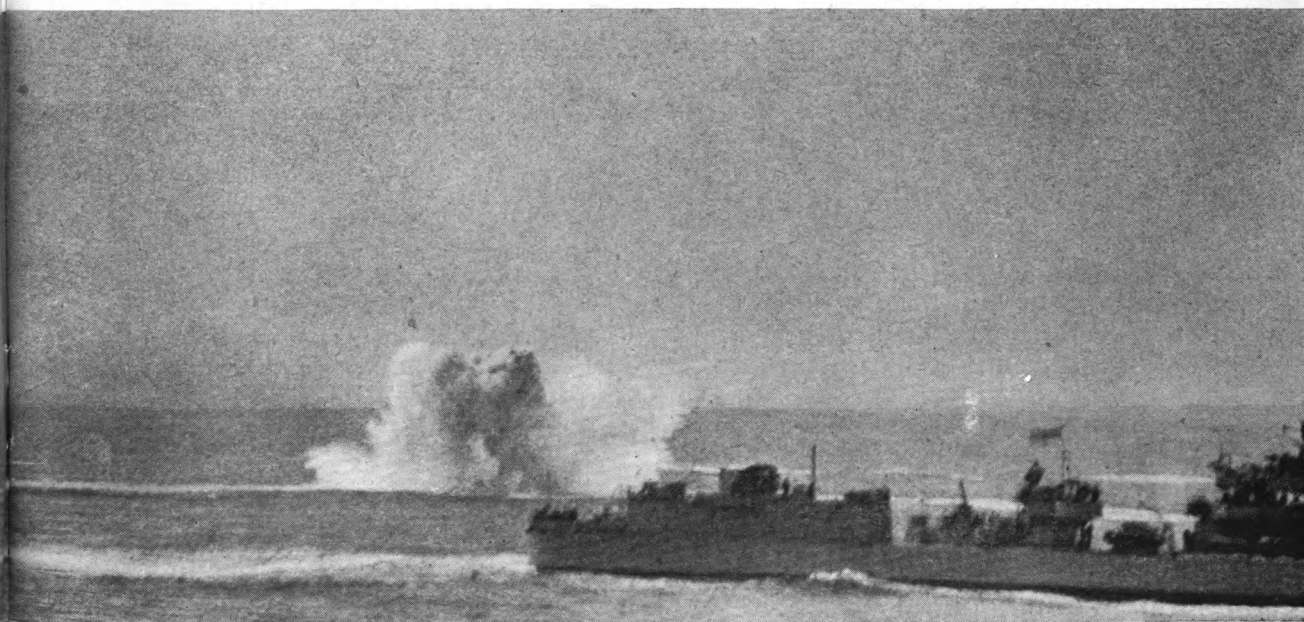
Their task completed, the Kandahar and Kingston made rendezvous with Admiral King's squadron in the dawn of the 23rd.

Ashore in Crete the failure of the convoys to arrive must have been a serious setback for the enemy. At Canea, Heraklion and Retimo the parachute attacks had failed and the invaders had lost heavily. Only at Maleme had there been any success, and it was characteristic of the Germans that in the moment of reverse they grasped this one success and exploited it to the utmost. They flung their entire energy into consolidating their hold on the airfield. All day the air attacks on the defenders never slackened. By evening the enemy had practically uninterrupted use of the airfield. Reinforcements and airborne equipment poured in in an unending stream.

During the afternoon of the 22nd, the 5th Destroyer Flotilla (the Kelly, Kashmir, Kipling, Kelvin and Jackal) had joined Admiral King's forces from Malta, and as soon as it was dark was despatched to search for survivors from the Fiji and Gloucester. The flotilla then proceeded to bombard Maleme, and encountering two caiques bound for Crete sank them both.

At 4 a.m. on the 23rd, the Commander-in-Chief ordered all forces to return to Alexandria to refuel and ammunition. When south of Crete the 5th Flotilla (from which Kelvin and Jackal had been detached) was





TOWARDS THE BATTLE. The 5th Destroyer Flotilla, despatched from Malta, joins Admiral King's squadron on 22nd May. *Above*, the cruisers and destroyers move towards Crete. *Below*, suspecting a submarine, the destroyers drop depth-charges; the Kelly is seen in the foreground.

attacked, and the Kelly and Kashmir dodged sticks of bombs from four Dorniers. Just before 8 a.m. a formation of a couple of dozen Junkers 87s attacked. The Kashmir, after dodging half a dozen bombs, was hit. She heeled over and sank in two minutes. During those two minutes Ordinary Seaman Ian D. Rhodes, Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve, when his Oerlikon gun submerged, climbed over the wreckage to the other gun and, as the ship was sinking under him, opened fire on the attacking aircraft and shot it down. The Kelly was the next to go, struck by a 1,000 lb. bomb when she was doing 30 knots under full starboard rudder. During her previous service in home waters she had been once mined and once torpedoed, and each time she had struggled gallantly back to harbour, and emerged to fight again another day. But this time there was no return for the Kelly. With every gun blazing defiance she capsized, floated bottom up for a while, and sank at last.

Commander A. St. Clair-Ford, R.N., in the Kipling closed at full speed, and became the target for a further attack. This the Kipling eluded, and lowering all her boats and Carley floats, rescued all surviving officers and men from the Kelly—128 of them. She then turned her attention to the Kashmir, rescuing her captain, Commander H. A. King, R.N., and 152 officers and men. While so busying herself, six bombing attacks were made on her; some were made by single aircraft, others came at her in groups, all dropping a full load.

As each attack developed, the Kipling had to leave her rescue work and devote her attention to dodging bombs and to beating off her assailants. The motor boat was in the water, but still secured to the falls, when one of these attacks commenced. Commander St. Clair-Ford was compelled to start his engines and get way on the ship with the utmost urgency. Every effort was made to get the boat clear, but there was no time. She dragged under, tearing the davits

out of the ship. They carried with them the first lieutenant, Lieutenant-Commander J. E. S. Bush, R.N., and the first lieutenant of the Kelly, Lieutenant-Commander Lord Hugh Beresford, R.N., who were trying desperately to cut the falls.

The Kipling then made her way to Alexandria, having survived, between 8.20 a.m. and 1 p.m., forty attacks by aircraft and the perils of 83 bombs.

That night, 23rd May, those ships which were still afloat reached Alexandria safely. Early the previous morning the destroyers Decoy and Hero had embarked the King of Greece, his suite and the British Minister from a small bay on the south coast of Crete. They returned to Alexandria under protection of the battleships.

5. The Claw Takes Hold

24th MAY—27th MAY, 1941

IT WAS NOW CLEAR to the Commander-in-Chief that a seaborne landing in Crete could be prevented only at a terrible cost to the Fleet. In fact, at the present rate of sinking and damage, a point would be reached within a few days when the command of the Eastern Mediterranean would be jeopardised. It remained to be seen whether the Germans could achieve the conquest of Crete by air. Already there were indications that the maintenance of supplies to the British troops in the island was hourly becoming more difficult under the unopposed bombing and machine-gunning.

The Captain-in-Charge at Suda, whose headquarters were dug out of a quarry, watched the sickening one-sidedness of the

battle as the troop carriers arrived and left in a ceaseless flow. Things were not looking too good. If evacuation became necessary it would be from Sfakia, a fishing village on the south coast, with an adequate beach. He decided to send wireless equipment there to secure communications with the Commander-in-Chief at Alexandria in case he had to control an evacuation from that point.

This task was entrusted to Lieutenant A. H. Blake, R.N.R., commanding motor launch 1011, and Paymaster-Lieutenant B. H. Dunn, R.N., with orders to proceed after dark. On clearing the south-west corner of the island, motor launch 1011 ran into an easterly gale and had to take shelter at Selinos Kastelli. Soon after dawn the launch was sighted and attacked by four bombers and five fighters. The only gun was blown overboard and Mr. C. A. Windebank, Warrant Telegraphist, killed. The launch was sunk. The officers and men swam ashore under a hail of machine-gun bullets and set out to walk over the mountains to Sfakia, guided by Greeks. They had no food, but sometimes obtained goats' milk. One night was spent in the snow at 7,000 feet elevation. They reached Sfakia early on

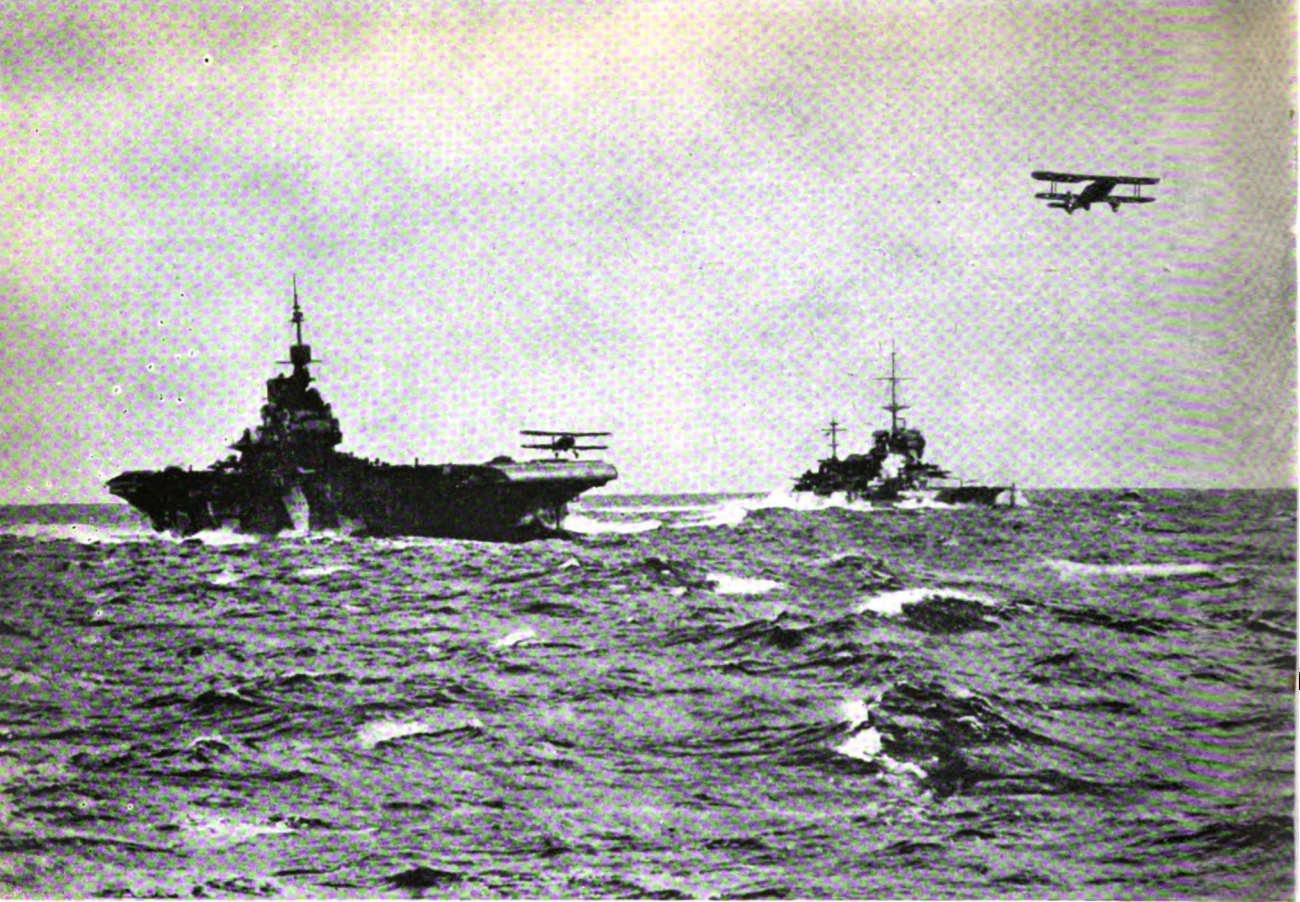
the 27th, but the wireless equipment was at the bottom of the sea.

Meanwhile, things had been going badly on the island. After a furious bombing attack on 25th May, the enemy attacked eastward from Maleme, and the defenders were forced to withdraw. The following day General Weston, Royal Marines, took over command of the western front. The minelayer Abdiel landed reinforcements at Suda on the night of the 24th and again on the 26th, returning each time with wounded and prisoners. She was accompanied by the destroyers Hero and Nizam. Although the force was heavily bombed during the passages, none of the ships was hit.

On the 25th, the Commander-in-Chief decided to attack the enemy airfield at Scarpanto in the Dodecanese and destroy bombers taking part in the operations. At noon Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell, flying his flag in H.M.S. Queen Elizabeth, sailed with the Barham, the aircraft-carrier Formidable, the flagship of Rear-Admiral D. W. Boyd, C.B.E., D.S.C., commanded by Captain A. W. La T. Bisset, R.N., and eight destroyers. Early next morning when



THE MISSION OF M.L. 1011. This Langmaid painting shows the motor launch 1011 carrying vital wireless equipment to Sfakia, the fishing village chosen for the evacuation. The motor launch never arrived. She was caught by German bombers and sunk.



SURPRISE ATTACK. Albacores take off from the aircraft-carrier Formidable. On 25th May, Albacores and Fulmars from the carrier attacked the airfield on the island of Scarpanto, east of Crete. While returning to Alexandria, the Formidable was bombed and badly damaged. The other ship in this photograph is the battleship Warspite.

about one hundred miles from Scarpanto, the Formidable's Albacores made a surprise bombing attack on the airfield; the Fulmars followed, machine-gunning the parked lines of aircraft and putting them out of action. They then withdrew and the Fulmars spent the forenoon in combat with enemy aircraft that approached the fleet, shooting down all they could reach. At 1.20 p.m., when all the fighters except two had landed on the carrier to refuel, a large force of enemy aircraft was seen approaching from the African coast. Diving through the fleet's barrage, a Ju.87 swooped on the Formidable and hit her forward. About eight more then attacked, and she was hit again. She extinguished the fire caused by the explosion, her two Fulmars landed on

and, although considerably damaged, she continued to operate her fighters till dark, when a course was set for Alexandria under destroyer escort.

At the same time that the Formidable was hit, the Nubian, one of the destroyers in the screen, was struck by a bomb aft, which wiped out the after guns. A few minutes later a violent explosion sent flames and smoke 200 feet into the air, suggesting that the stored depth-charges had gone up. Commander R. W. Ravenhill, D.S.C., R.N., the Nubian's captain, found to his surprise that the engines were still working and although the rudder had gone he contrived to steer with the propellers, setting course for Alexandria. Another destroyer, the Jervis, that closed him after the bomb struck, remained in company.

The flooding aft was so extensive that Commander Ravenhill gave orders to fire torpedoes and jettison everything that would help lighten the ship. He records ruefully that in the process some zealot threw overboard the officers' laundry, which was in a basket in the after flat. An attack was made on the crippled ship an hour later by five high-level bombers, but by stopping one engine Commander Ravenhill contrived to dodge the bombs and brought his ship into harbour without further damage.

That night, 26th May, the pressure on the exhausted holders of the western front made a withdrawal necessary. Under the command of General Weston, a rearguard action by Royal Marines, Australian and New Zealand Brigades, and counter-attacks with the bayonet by a Maori battalion, enabled the withdrawal to be effected and the defenders commenced to move southward towards Sfakia.

Captain Morse, his staff officer Commander C. Wauchope, R.N., and a skeleton staff (the remainder had been embarked in the *Abdiel*) joined General Freyberg at his headquarters under a tree in a gully near Suda Point. While they made preparations to leave Suda and transport themselves and their staffs by night to Sfakia, questing aircraft circled overhead, bombing and machine-gunning every movement in the vicinity.

The decision to leave Suda Bay meant the dispersal of a fleet of small craft that had become available there, as patrol vessels and for minesweeping, after the withdrawal of the Army from Greece. This seems the proper moment to tell their story.

They were the corvette *Salvia*, the minesweepers *Widnes*, *Derby* and *Lanner*, and the trawler *Moonstone*; four South African-built whalers, *Syvern*, *Kos 21*, *22*, *23*, and the motor launches *1011*, *1030* and *1032*. There were also three A-lighters, Nos. 6, 16 and 20, under the command of Lieutenant B. W. Waters, R.N.V.R. Their individual captains were Lieutenant J.

D. Sutton, R.N.V.R., Sub-Lieutenant A. Howarth, R.N.V.R., and Mr. E. J. Boissel, Boatswain, R.N.

The *Salvia*, *Derby* and *Moonstone* were eventually withdrawn from this fleet of small vessels for service elsewhere. With the exception of the *Lanner*, *Kos 21* and motor launch *1032*, all the remainder were sunk. The *Lanner* was a little trawler with a Maltese crew commanded by an Aberdeen captain, Skipper W. Stewart, R.N.R. The *Salvia*, under the command of Lieutenant-Commander J. I. Miller, D.S.O., R.N.R., and the *Lanner* were singled out for special mention by Captain Morse. Throughout the preliminary bombing and the final attack they went "fearless and determined" about their hazardous duties. The words are the words of the despatch: they applied to a handful of Maltese led by a Scottish fisherman with a pensioner chief stoker in charge in the engine room; and a corvette's crew, mostly very young, many of them civilians before the war, commanded by an officer of the Reserve with a D.S.O. already to his credit. Perpetually bombed and machine-gunned, with no more cover than their shrapnel helmets, they patrolled the coast, swept the channels, covered the arrival of reinforcements and the unloading of stores, fought the fires in ships ablaze in the harbour, towed sinking ones to the beach; their guns were in action all day, giving as good as they got and shooting down their assailants if they were betrayed into a moment's unwariness.

Although these two little ships were specially singled out for mention there was little to choose between the service they performed and that of the remainder of the Crete Patrol Force. What the *Salvia* and the *Lanner* did, the others did as long as they remained afloat. The *Widnes* (Lieutenant-Commander A. G. Brookes, R.N.R.), and the South African whaler *Kos 23* were lost on the 20th, both bombed and beached. On the 23rd the *Syvern* was attacked and fourteen bombs were dropped on her. Her

captain, Lieutenant-Commander R. E. Clarke, R.D., R.N.R., was wounded, and the first lieutenant, Lieutenant A. R. J. Tilston, R.N.R., took command. Two days previously she had been attacked and set on fire. The ammunition locker had been ablaze and a number of shells exploded, but, in a lull, Ordinary Seamen Gutteridge and Efan proceeded to throw the remainder overboard and extinguished the fires.

At midnight on 26th May, all the patrol craft were ordered to sail for Alexandria, proceeding west-about. The Syvern and the Kos 22 (Lieutenant H. D. Foxon, R.D., R.N.R.) lay up under the cliffs next day waiting for darkness to proceed on their way, but towards evening they were sighted by bombers and both ships were hit and blew up. The surviving officers and men struggled ashore and made their way overland to Sfakia.

The Kos 21, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander I. F. H. Wilson, R.N.V.R. (S.A.), struggled across to the African coast under severe bombing attacks which twice disabled the engines and wrecked compasses and wireless. With her dead and wounded she eventually reached Alexandria, having accounted for three enemy aircraft.

Of the three motor launches, the fate of the 1011 has already been recorded. The other two, the 1030 and 1032, proceeded in company at 10 p.m. on 27th, but lost sight of each other in the darkness.

At 5.30 a.m. on the 28th, the motor launch 1030, commanded by Lieutenant W. O. Cooksey, R.N.V.R., was bombed when 15 miles west of the island of Gavdopula. The launch began to sink and under a withering machine-gun fire they took to the dinghy and the raft. For 20 hours they rowed and baled, towing the raft against a heavy sea. There was insufficient room in the dinghy for all, and three of them had to cling to the raft, pounded by the waves. They took it in turns to occupy the raft, asking for relief when they reached complete exhaustion.

They landed at last on the island, repaired

the dinghy which was full of bullet holes, and made for Crete, 20 miles distant; and so eventually reached Sfakia.

Meanwhile, the 1032, commanded by Lieutenant E. N. Rose, R.N.V.R., having searched in vain for her consort, shaped course for Alexandria; during the passage she beat off an aircraft with her guns, after a 20-minute duel, and arrived safely, the only motor launch to survive.

The A-lighter No. 16, already mentioned, under command of Mr. E. J. Boissel, Boatswain, R.N., was one of the earliest arrivals at Suda Bay, having reached there from Tobruk. One of the engines was damaged by a bomb and, as there were no spare parts available to repair it, the A. 16 continued to work on the other one alone right through the evacuation of Greece until the Crete invasion, landing troops, lorries, Bren gun carriers, clothing, food and stores from the transports. She survived 37 direct attacks and after 28 days of it her captain recorded that his crew was beginning to feel the strain. "They began to look," he said, "to my coxswain, Able Seaman Markwick, and myself for encouragement to carry on." Having betrayed the fact that they were merely mortal and presumably having received the encouragement they sought, they carried on undaunted until 27th May, when they were ordered to sink their lighter and embark in the Abdiel.

Admiral Pridham-Wippell's force—the battleships *Queen Elizabeth*, under the command of Captain C. B. Barry, D.S.O., R.N., and *Barham*, commanded by Captain G. C. Cooke, R.N., and five destroyers—was off Kaso Strait on the morning of that day, covering the return of the *Abdiel*. Just before 9 a.m. fifteen aircraft attacked the force out of the sun, hitting the *Barham* on one of her turrets and starting a serious fire which was eventually extinguished. Two of the attackers were shot down and another damaged. The force returned to Alexandria that evening. They

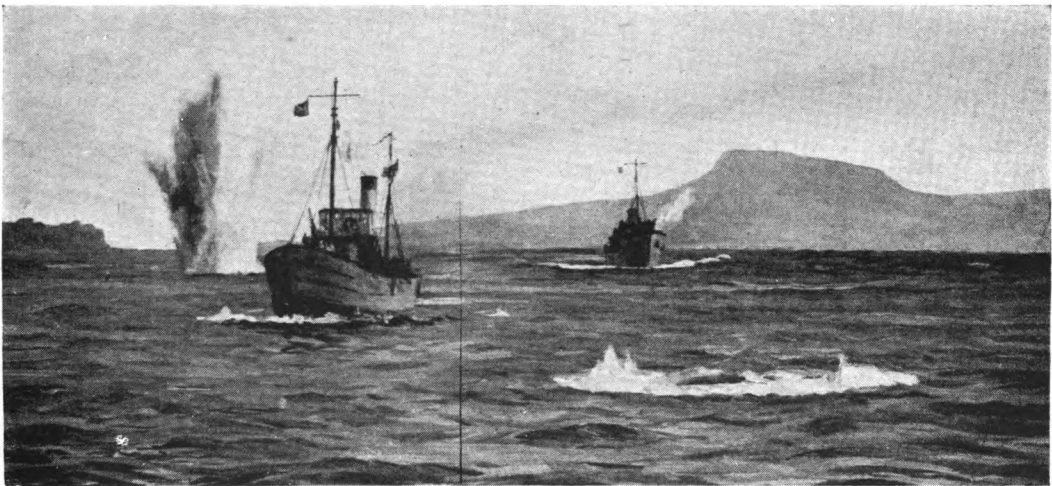
found on arrival that orders had been received to withdraw the Army from Crete forthwith.

On Crete itself, this day (27th May) had been spent by Captain Morse and Commander Wauchope at the combined headquarters they shared with General Freyberg under a tree a mile and a half west of the Signal Station. The road past it was perpetually bombed and machine-gunned, and towards evening the site itself was subjected to the same unpleasantness. Bombs repeatedly struck the hillside above them and bounced down the slope towards them like footballs, before exploding. An attempt to fetch provisions from the dock area resulted in Lieutenant-Commander I. G. Robertson, R.N., being seriously wounded and Leading Seaman Simonite killed. The lorry in which they had undertaken this desperate sortie was burnt out with everybody's belongings.

At 9 p.m. Captain Morse gave orders for the wireless station to be destroyed. A portable set was loaded into a lorry for use at Sfakia, the one previously despatched having been lost in the motor launch 1011,

and at 10 p.m. the little convoy of lorries, with General Freyberg and Captain Morse and their staffs, started for Sfakia. Under cover of General Weston's rearguard action, a general withdrawal of the troops to Sfakia had begun. Progress was slow owing to congestion on the single mountain road, with its appalling surfaces. Dawn on 28th May found the convoy some distance from its destination, on a plateau that afforded cover in olive groves. The lorries turned into this concealment just in time, as reconnaissance aircraft and bombers appeared a few minutes later and began bombing the road.

The jolting had, however, damaged the valves of the wireless set. As they depended on it to keep in touch with the Commander-in-Chief at Alexandria during the evacuation, it became necessary to find some alternative means of communication. The R.A.F. unit, which had originally been stationed at Maleme, was known to have sent a portable set to Sfakia on the night of the 25th. Captain Morse decided to go in search of it. At 10 a.m. on 28th May, he found it in a cave about a mile from Sfakia and here the three Services made their headquarters.



THE LITTLE SHIPS OF SUDA BAY. The minesweeper Lanner and the corvette Salvia were two of the small ships of the Crete Patrol Force. This Langmaid painting shows them being attacked in Suda Bay. Bombed and machine-gunned endlessly, the little ships went about their work "fearless and determined".

This R.A.F. wireless set remained the only link between the Headquarters of the Middle East Command, the Navy at Alexandria, and the retreating defenders of Crete, who gathered in ever-increasing numbers on the plateau overlooking the tiny fishing village of Sfakia. Rations were running short, and here they spent the hours of daylight crouched under bushes and stones and anything that would offer concealment from enemy aircraft.

In the meantime the rearguard action under General Weston was stubbornly holding the enemy from pressing too closely on the heels of our exhausted troops who had themselves, a few weeks previously, fought a rearguard action the length of Greece and had now been subjected to ceaseless bombing without aerial protection for a week, fighting day and night.

6. Once More Unto The Breach

28th MAY—1st JUNE, 1941

ADMIRAL CUNNINGHAM had been out of touch with events in Crete from about 9 p.m. on 27th May, when the wireless station at Suda Bay had been destroyed, until the forenoon on the 28th, when the Captain-in-Charge reached the cave at Sfakia. But by some incredible feat of clairvoyance, Captain Morse in his last message from Suda gave an estimate of the number of troops that would be available for embarkation during the next four nights from Sfakia, Plaka Bay, Heraklion and Timbaki, and in

the event these numbers proved substantially correct.

In making his dispositions for the evacuation the Commander-in-Chief decided that the main embarkation on the night of 28th–29th May should be from Heraklion. On the 23rd, the enemy had delivered an ultimatum to the garrison to surrender, but this had been rejected by the British and Greek Commanders.

At 6 a.m. on 28th May, Rear-Admiral Rawlings sailed from Alexandria with the cruisers Orion, Ajax and Dido and six destroyers, to lift the Heraklion garrison.

Air attacks began at 5 p.m. when the force was about 90 miles from Scarpanto, the enemy air base in the Dodecanese. At 7.20 p.m. the Imperial, one of the destroyer escort, was narrowly missed by a bomb, and at 8.10 p.m. the Ajax was even more narrowly missed, being damaged above the waterline and sustaining a number of casualties. As soon as it was dark she was ordered to return to Alexandria; this was no venture for a lame duck.

The force reached Heraklion at 11.30 p.m. The two cruisers Orion and Dido remained off the entrance while the destroyers entered the harbour four at a time, filled up to capacity alongside the pier, and transferred the troops to the cruisers. Embarkation proceeded under direction of Captain Macdonald, the Naval Officer-in-Charge. It was complete by 3 a.m. when the Kimberley and Imperial cleared the harbour with the entire rearguard. Except for wounded in hospital too ill to move, not one of the British force was left behind.

At the same time, a force of destroyers, the Napier, Nizam, Kelvin and Kandahar, under Captain S. H. T. Arliss, R.N., proceeded to Sfakia. They carried extra boats, provisions and ammunition for the troops to be embarked on subsequent nights, and took off all then available on the Sfakia beach. The Napier's passengers included three women, one Chinaman, two children and a dog. The imagination tends

to wander in conjecture as to their subsequent story. Anyhow, they all reached Alexandria safely by 5 p.m. on the 29th.

With Admiral Rawlings's force, however, things did not go so smoothly. Three-quarters of an hour after leaving Heraklion, the Imperial's steering gear broke down as a result of the near-miss the previous day. They were still off a hostile shore and if they were to run the gauntlet of the Kaso Strait under protection of darkness there was no time to waste. The Hotspur was ordered to embark the Imperial's complement, which included part of the rearguard, and to sink her. This she did, rejoining the squadron with 900 men on board just after sunrise. Speed was increased to the maximum, but the rising sun revealed them an hour and a half behind their programme. As they turned southward into the Kaso Strait, attacks from Junkers began with grim savagery.

At 6.25 a.m. on 29th May, the Hereward was hit and fell out of line. To linger so close to enemy air bases with ships crowded with troops was to invite further disaster. Admiral Rawlings had no alternative but to steel his heart and hold to his course and speed. When last seen the Hereward was making slowly for Crete five miles away, every gun in action against attacking aircraft. The majority of her officers and men survived as prisoners of war. Their ship sank.

To supplement the ships' armaments, the troops on board the cruisers mounted their own Bren and Lewis guns in every available space on deck and fought desperately against the ever-increasing onslaught of the bombers. A near-miss on the Decoy reduced the squadron's speed to 25 knots. Another on the Orion caused it to drop to 21. The Dido was hit on a forward turret and then the Orion was hit again and set on fire.

Captain G. R. B. Back, R.N., Admiral Rawlings's flag captain, had been mortally wounded by a machine-gun bullet at 7.35 a.m. Immediately before his death a couple of

hours later, the ship was convulsed by several near-misses; he came back to consciousness and attempted to sit up, calling on everyone to "Keep steady!" When the attack was finished he shouted: "It's all right, men—that one's over!" and so died. Commander T. C. T. Wynne, R.N., took command of the ship.

A lull in the assault enabled the fire parties to extinguish the fires and the medical staff to deal with the wounded, but it lasted only about three-quarters of an hour. The attacks were then renewed. Wave succeeded wave until finally a formation of eleven Ju. 87s dived on the Orion, pressing home the attack with fierce determination.

One bomb passed through the Orion's bridge to explode on the stokers' messdeck; the deck was crowded to capacity with soldiers. The results of this catastrophe were indescribably terrible. For a moment darkness concealed the horror. Then flames began to glow through the choking smoke; into this blazing shambles the rescuers flung themselves. Every officer and man not at action stations or incapacitated, naval and military, passengers and crew, joined in this heroic struggle against calamity between decks. They extinguished fires, extricated and tended wounded—the sick-bay had been demolished—restored communications, and removed the dead.

Foremost among these—the first lieutenant had been killed—was Lieutenant-Commander Miller, the captain of the *Salvia* who on account of his local knowledge had taken passage in the Orion to act as pilot at Heraklion. He organised fire parties and, under the shocking conditions of the mess-decks, kept up the spirits of the rescuers. Numbers of wounded owe their lives to his efforts.

In the meanwhile, the ship was out of control; the compasses had gone; the engine room telegraphs had gone; the steering gear had gone. One boiler room was untenable, the others in darkness. Three of the five engineer officers were

dead. The ship was being steered by her after steering wheel, orders being passed verbally from the bridge aft along a chain of soldiers and seamen. Between 11 a.m. and noon she took on a heavy list to starboard.

"This," wrote Commander (E) H. F. Atkins, R.N., in charge of the engine room department, "was perhaps the least pleasant moment of a disagreeable day. The heavy list, lack of light, ship not being under control due to destruction of steering gear, the fires still burning forward, filling the machinery space with smoke, and the fact that only one shaft was turning, tended to cause uneasiness. Every man remained at his post and went on with his job. The steaming registers were properly kept throughout."

Shortly before noon two Fulmars of the Fleet Air Arm made contact with the squadron, and although a few more attacks were made, they did no damage. Himself wounded, Admiral Rawlings brought his shattered squadron safely back to Alexandria at 8 p.m. that night; the Orion had then two rounds of her main armament ammunition left and ten tons of oil fuel.

Let us now go back to Sfakia. Some of the difficulties of evacuation from its beach became apparent for the first time to Captain Morse and General Freyberg when they reached their cave headquarters on the morning of the 28th. The road over the mountains from Suda to Sfakia finished up with a series of acute hairpin bends and came to an abrupt termination at the top of an escarpment 500 feet high. From this point a precipitous goat track led down to the little fishing village and a shingle beach that was less than 200 yards wide. The troops assembled on the plateau and on the beach had to remain hidden from air observation until actually called forward to embark. Touch between the beach area and the top of the escarpment had to be maintained on foot. It was a two-hour climb for an active man.

As soon as he had taken stock of the situation, Captain Morse signalled to his Commander-in-Chief that on the following night (29th-30th May) 10,000 men would require embarkation.

The naval transport *Glengyle* (Captain C. H. Petrie, R.N.) and four cruisers, the *Phoebe*, *Perth*, *Calcutta* and *Coventry*, with the destroyers *Jervis*, *Janus* and *Hasty*, were accordingly sailed for Sfakia. This force, which was commanded by Rear-Admiral King with his flag in the *Phoebe* (Captain G. Grantham, R.N.), arrived off the beach at 11.30 p.m. on the 29th.

Three landing craft carried by the *Glen-*

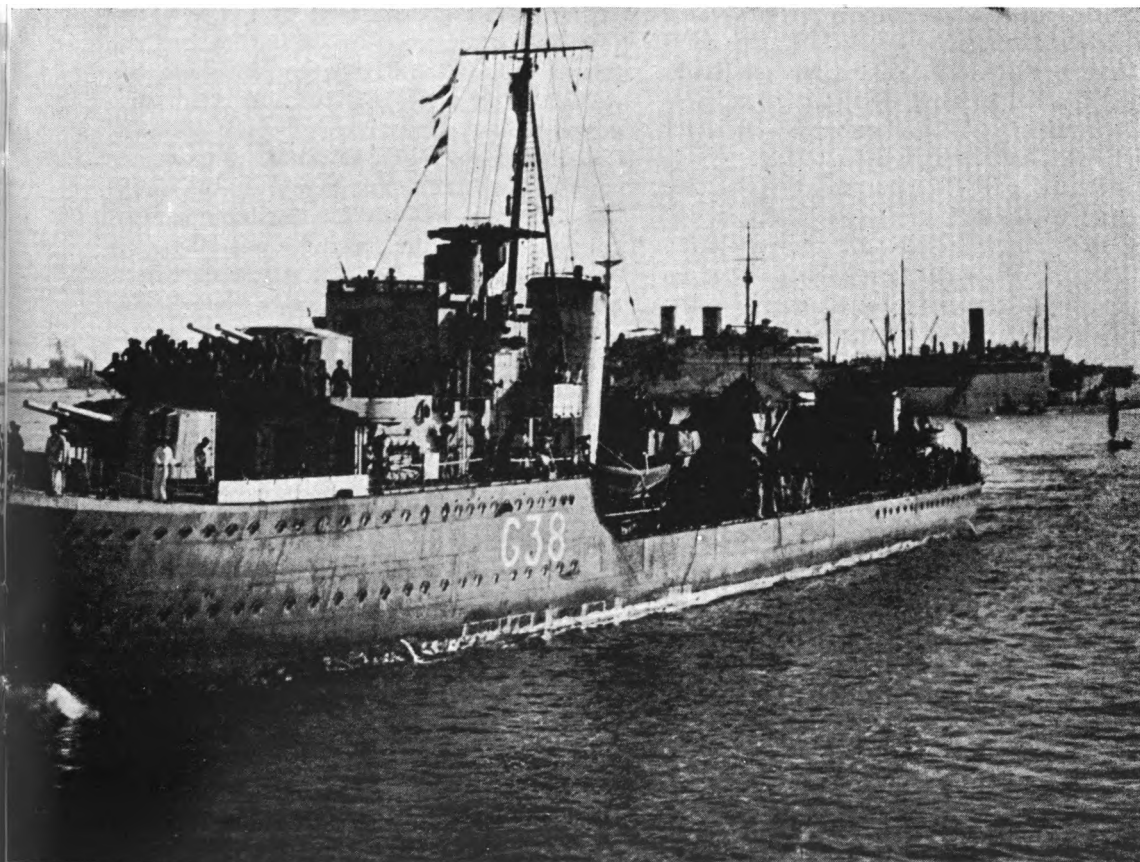


gyle filled her and the cruisers with waiting troops. In all about 7,000 were embarked before the time danger limit, 3.20 a.m., was reached, and the force was compelled to sail. The landing craft hid in caverns along the coast in readiness for the next night's operation.

At dawn on the 30th, the squadron was reinforced by the destroyers Stuart, Jaguar and Defender. During the passage to Alexandria the Perth was hit and suffered two near-misses which put her foremost boiler room out of action. In the scalding steam escaping from a burst main steam pipe, two men remained behind after the boiler

room had been evacuated in an attempt to rescue a stoker they could see lying on the gratings beneath the fracture. Their shipmate was dead when, themselves parboiled, they reached and retrieved the body. They were Mr. H. C. Hill, Acting Warrant Mechanician, and Stoker Petty Officer W. J. H. Reece.

During their return on the afternoon of the 30th, Admiral King's force met the Napier and the Nizam bound for Sfakia to continue the embarkation operations. The Kandahar and the Kelvin had started with them but had been damaged by near-misses and compelled to turn back.



SAFE RETURN. A destroyer crowded with troops withdrawn from Crete arrives back in Alexandria. They were embarked in the darkness from small, open beaches, and the journeys to and from the island were made under constant air attack.

The time had now come to weigh in all seriousness the dire losses sustained by the Fleet, against the strategical necessity for continuing the evacuation: the latter side of the balance was weighted by considerations of humanity and all the promptings of naval tradition against leaving troops in enemy hands while a ship remained afloat to continue the evacuation.

What, however, ultimately brought the operation to a conclusion was lack of food and the exhaustion of the remnants of the Army in Crete. For days the rationing problem had been grave, both for the rearguard and the retreating troops they covered. As far as could be estimated when Admiral King's force returned from Sfakia on the night of the 30th, another 6,500 men remained to be withdrawn: it became a race between embarkation and the compulsion to surrender. The Commander-in-Chief decided to send over every available ship of his battered and exhausted fleet for one last lift on the night of 31st May.

He was strengthened in this resolve because a number of R.A.F. fighters was available from 30th May till the conclusion of the operation. An aircraft despatched on the 29th to drop a message over Retimo ordering the garrison to withdraw to Plaka Bay on the south coast did not return, and as they had no supplies it was decided to abandon an attempt to withdraw them. A bomber did, however, drop sufficient rations for the force at Plaka Bay.

General Freyberg and Captain Morse and their respective staffs were withdrawn from Sfakia by flying boat to Egypt on the night of the 30th, leaving General Weston in command in Crete. Before midnight on the 31st, General Weston received orders from Headquarters to transfer the Command to the next senior officer with orders that he was to come to terms of capitulation with the enemy. General Weston was ordered to return by flying boat to Egypt. During the evacuation, hundreds of men were rescued by these Sunderlands of Coastal Command.

The force that Admiral Cunningham sent for the last time along that *via dolorosa* of the Mediterranean Fleet consisted of the cruiser Phoebe (wearing the flag of Rear-Admiral King), the minelayer Abdiel, and the destroyers Jackal, Kimberley and Hotspur. It was all that was left available.

Three air attacks were made on the passage but they were ineffective. The squadron reached Sfakia beach soon after midnight, to find the three landing craft waiting with their loads. They had been hiding in the caves all day, being machine-gunned at intervals, and now, when all the troops who could be taken had been embarked, two of the lighters were sunk and the third beached, officers and men being embarked in the Phoebe.

The squadron sailed at 3 a.m. on 1st June with over 4,000 troops on board. To the adequate R.A.F. fighter protection on this last passage can be attributed the absence of any air attacks. The anti-aircraft cruisers Calcutta and Coventry were sailed early on 1st June to reinforce Admiral King, but on their way to the rendezvous two Ju. 88s dived on the Calcutta out of the sun. She was struck by two bombs and sank in a few minutes. Captain W. P. Carne, R.N., commanding the Coventry, in spite of the risk involved, succeeded in picking up 23 officers and 232 men, including Captain D. M. Lees, D.S.O., R.N. This Parthian shaft deprived the Fleet of a grand little ship whose record of arduous service and gallant endeavour in the face of air attacks can have few equals. She had been the pride of peace-time squadrons and a flagship in far-off seas; but neither the admirals who have flown their flags in her nor the officers and men who had served her in the past would have wished her a worthier end.

By 5.30 p.m. on 1st June, Rear-Admiral King's force was disembarking at Alexandria the last lift from Sfakia. It was finished.

Among those participants mentioned in the despatches of this operation two are selected: between their respective ranks

runs the whole of what comprises command and service in the Royal Navy.

"Reference must be made to the fearless judgment and gallant bearing of Rear-Admiral H. B. Rawlings, O.B.E., the Rear-Admiral Commanding the 7th Cruiser Squadron. Although his flagship was heavily damaged, her bridge wrecked, his flag captain killed and he himself wounded, Rear-Admiral Rawlings extricated his squadron with great determination. He was called upon to make most grave decisions, which he did without question."

"Assistant Cook William Edward Morris, who, despite repeated bombing attacks, remained staunchly in the galley preparing food. A man aged eighteen with under two months' sea experience."

Within the range of these two achievements lies all the story of human valour in the evacuation of Crete.

The men who carried it out—the officers and men of the Mediterranean Fleet—were not all hardened seamen, inured through years of training to danger and hardship. The majority, such is the bean-stalk growth of the Navy above its peace strength, were "Hostilities Only"—men entered from civilian employment and afloat in men-of-war for the first time in their lives. Hundreds who fought their guns and ships to the last were in their teens; the average age was well within the twenties. There were many more Reserve officers afloat than there were R.N.

The steadfastness of one man sustained the Fleet through an ordeal that has no parallel in its history. To officers and men, that steadfastness was like a torch, lighting them through the dark places of the spirit where there was no known road.

How he himself felt about it all is best expressed in the words of the Commander-in-Chief's despatch:

"It is not easy to convey how heavy was the strain that men and ships sustained. Apart from the cumulative effect of prolonged sea-going over extended periods, it has to be remembered that in this last instance ships' companies had none of the inspiration of battle with the enemy to bear them up. Instead, they had the unceasing anxiety of the task of

trying to bring away in safety thousands of their own countrymen, many of whom were in an exhausted and dispirited condition, in ships necessarily so overcrowded that even when there was an opportunity to relax conditions made this impossible. They had started the evacuation already overtired, and they had to carry it through under conditions of savage air attack such as had only recently caused grievous losses in the Fleet.

"There is rightly little credit or glory to be expected in these operations of retreat, but I feel that the spirit of tenacity shown by those who took part should not go unrecorded."

7. The Last Rally of the Royal Marines

THERE IS A STORY of the evacuation of Crete which still remains to be told. It does not fit into the main picture of the organised embarkation, for the men concerned were few in number and they organised their own escape. Their story is a small but memorable incident in the history of the Royal Marines.

The Royal Marine battalion that had formed part of the rearguard fought to the last, knowing how slender were their chances of rescue. They are said to have "conducted themselves in a manner worthy of the highest traditions of the Corps." Now the traditions of the Corps include episodes like the taking of Belle Isle, Gallipoli, Beaumont Hamel and Zeebrugge. There is no longer any room on their colours for their battle honours, so they wear a globe instead and the word "Gibraltar." Lord St. Vincent, probably the strictest disciplinarian the Navy has ever known, and not given to flummery, once said of them that in the country's hour of real danger they would be

found its sheet anchor. Before dismissing their achievements with a phrase whose radiance is a little dulled with usage, it is well to remember these things.

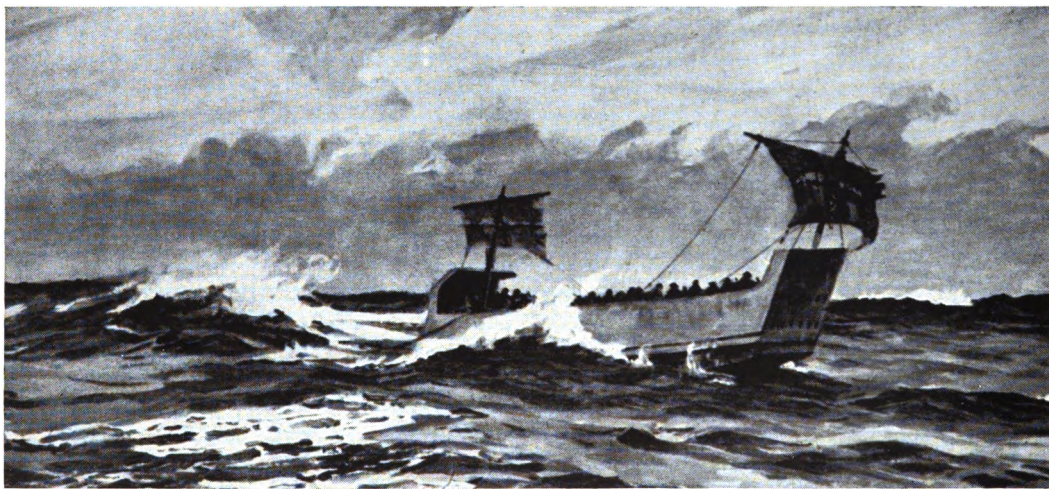
Eventually reaching the beach at Sfakia too late for the last lift, the battalion was disbanded by Major R. Garrett, Royal Marines, on 31st May, by order of the Senior Army Officer ashore.

Major Garrett, having carried out his instructions, then made it known that he would never allow himself to be taken prisoner, that he intended to find a boat and make his way to Africa. Having made his purpose plain to his famished and exhausted men, he set off in search of a boat, and in the bay found the landing craft abandoned by Lieutenant McDowall, R.N.V.R. Swimming off to her he found a wire foul of the port screw and the engines incapacitated. She had, however, some provisions onboard and appeared to be seaworthy.

Major Garrett then went in search of an engineer. In the ruins of the bombed village he found one J. Lester, a lance-corporal of the 2/7 Australian Battalion, who had been a mechanic in civil life and was still game

for anything. On their way off to the lighter they were joined by another Australian, Lieutenant K. R. Walker, and between them they got life into the engine, and finally warped the lighter inshore. Major Garrett then called for volunteers to join him on this desperate venture. It was the last rally of the Royal Marines in Crete. To his stout-hearted "Who goes home?" five officers and 134 other ranks responded. They included Royal Marines, Australians, New Zealanders and men from the Commandos landed by the Abdiel on 24th and 26th May. They collected all the petrol, water containers and rations they could lay their hands on, and at 9 a.m. on 1st June they cast off; there was a light mist drifting in from seaward and under cover of this they made their way to Gavdopula Island that had harboured the crew of the M.L. 1030. Here they secured in a cave.

An armed party was landed and returned with the report that they were the only inhabitants of the island. A well was found and all containers filled. The engine room staff, consisting of four Australian corporals and a Commando sergeant, refitted the



ESCAPE FROM CRETE. Too late for the last lift and determined not to fall into enemy hands, 140 Royal Marines, Australians, New Zealanders and Commando troops managed to cross to Africa in an abandoned landing craft. This Langmaid painting shows the vessel under sail made by sewing blankets together.

engine. The troops were "exercised in seamanship." The phrase is taken from Major Garrett's report. What these exercises comprised is not known, but the sentence has a brave ring.

A complete muster was made of all their resources. Then came a good dinner, the first proper meal for three days, followed by a substantial supper, a last drink at the well, and a "top-up" of every water container. At 9.30 p.m. on 1st June, off they went.

Before leaving Sfakia Major Garrett had somehow contrived to find a map of the Eastern Mediterranean in the village. Lieutenant R. R. Macartney, of the 3rd Field Regiment, A.I.F., had a map of North Africa. With these two aids to navigation they set a course for Tobruk, 180 miles distant, which they knew to be in our hands. They had, of course, no sextant, no knowledge of the compass deviation, no log or chronometer or means of calculating the set of currents. They estimated they had petrol for 140 miles.

They lost two hours during the night of 1st June repairing the steering gear, which broke down. An experiment with diesel fuel in one engine, in an attempt to save petrol, merely resulted in the engine packing up. The other broke down in sympathy shortly afterwards.

Undaunted by the contrariness of the machine, Major Garrett made plain sail, the canvas being furnished somewhat inadequately by the winch cover. This just enabled them to keep the lighter on her course.

The sea rose and seasickness overwhelmed them. The devoted engine room staff continued, however, to strip down the engine and clear it of dieselite, which enabled them to get under way again until 6 p.m. on 2nd June when their petrol was exhausted.

All night they wallowed in a heavy sea under their rag of a sail. On 3rd June they were rationed to a sixth of a pint of water, an inch and a half cube of bully-beef and half a ship's biscuit. They burned flares at

night, using the diesel oil. Two young marines, A. Harding and A. R. Booth, were inspired to improvise a distilling plant from petrol tins, using the diesel oil as fuel. In two days they produced $4\frac{1}{2}$ gallons of drinking water. Rummaging among the stores Major Garrett found a tin of petrol which he hoarded for emergencies.

At 7.45 on the morning of 4th June, a Blenheim aircraft sighted them and circled them twice. This heartened everybody; they were getting very weak. The engineers busied themselves in changing the port clutch and gearbox with the starboard, which was slipping, and they ran the engine for half an hour in the evening to keep their spirits up.

Next day, unable to sight land, they used up the rest of the petrol hoping to lift the African coast; but when the engine petered out it was still the same horizon of waves heaving against the lonely sky to the south of them. Marine Harding built a raft of diesel oil drums, with floor boards as paddles; a raft-party volunteered to go and look for Africa and fetch help, but their craft was too unstable and the project had to be abandoned. Next day they rigged a canoe, but it would only take one man and they were too weak for a single-handed task. That too was given up.

They then devoted all their energies to sailing the lighter. They contrived to make four blankets into a jib and six into a main-sail. A marine named Yeo distinguished himself as sailmaker. The lighter refused to answer her helm and yawed despairingly. To wear ship it was necessary for these exhausted men to plunge overboard in small parties and by swimming with all the energy left in them push the bows round on to the proper course again.

They had two colour-sergeants and one sergeant of the Royal Marines onboard. The former were "old timers," the latter "Hostilities Only." Between them they heartened and sustained that clamjamfrey of armed scarecrows, bearded and gaunt and hollow-eyed, crowded together on the sun-

grilled plates of a landing craft. The senior, Colour-Sergeant C. A. Dean, was the lighter's sergeant-major, a combination of master-at-arms and purser, issuing the meagre ration of water with stern impartiality.

His fellow, Colour-Sergeant H. C. Colwill, organised the watches on board and constituted himself a sort of sailing master, which involved leading the swimming party into the water every time it was necessary to steady the ship on her course. Sergeant Bowden helped his seniors in these various activities. As a "Hostilities Only" he was probably not expected to be familiar with the routine of sailing the high seas in a square-nosed lighter that refused to answer her rudder and was propelled by blankets, and kept on her course by swimmers towards a coast they might never reach in time. It must be supposed that he just picked it up as he went along.

On 8th June, Private H. J. Wysocky and Driver K. Watson, 155 Battery, 52nd Light A.A. Brigade, died from exposure and exhaustion, and were buried. At 5.45 p.m. land was sighted.

At 1.30 a.m. on the 9th, they ran on to a sandy beach and lowered the brow. A patrol, under Lieutenant Macartney and Sergeant Bowden, was landed with orders to move south in the hope of striking the Sollum road. Two Maori soldiers, Private Thompson and Gunner Peters, volunteered to land and find water. They found a well a quarter of a mile away within 45 minutes.

Sergeant Bowden reappeared after some hours. He announced that they were beached seventeen miles west of Sidi Barrani, 100 miles to the eastward of Tobruk. They had made good 230 miles, but must have travelled nearer 250. Sidi Barrani was the headquarters of the 1st A.A. Regiment, and motor transport had been arranged for the following morning. Sergeant Bowden had found his way back across five miles of desert in the dark without a compass. The colour-sergeants must have agreed that one way

and another Sergeant Bowden showed promise.

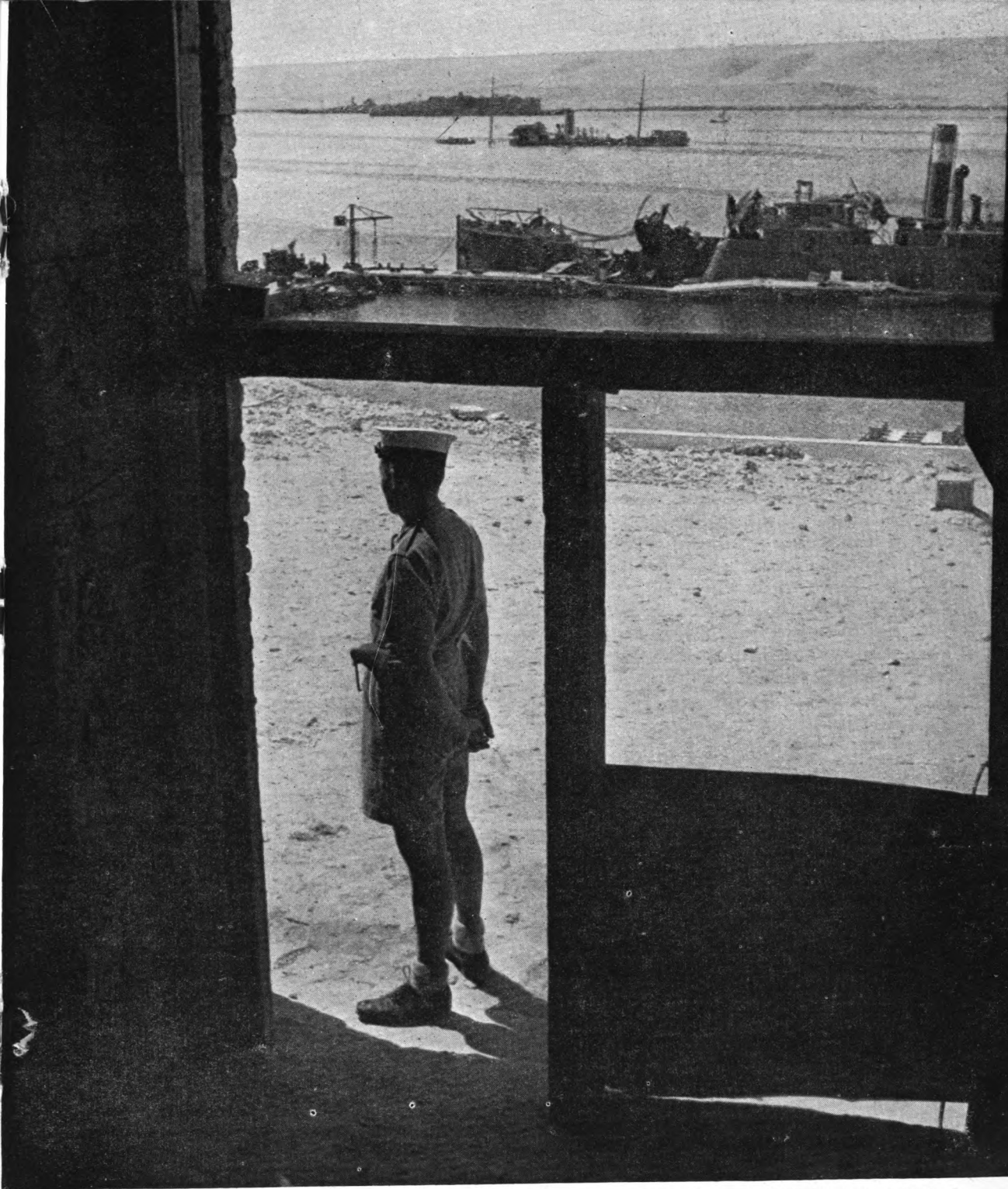
The following morning, 10th June, Major Garrett marched his force across the desert to where the lorries awaited them. It is appropriate that the story should end here—with the little band of the unbeaten trudging across the sand, their shadows shortening as the sun rose higher; they were still led by the man who had taught them that life and defeat cannot be co-existent, a man whose Corps motto was *Per Mare Per Terram*.

8. The Back Door of Tobruk

APRIL—JUNE, 1941

DURING THE GRIM WEEKS of the retreat in Greece and of the evacuation first of the mainland and then of Crete, the opposing armies in Africa continued to face each other upon the frontier. Nearly 125 miles to the west, the isolated fortress of Tobruk was holding out. Its back door opened upon the sea. And up to that back door, for the 242 days of the siege, came the little supply ships of the Inshore Squadron.

These little ships had co-operated in General Wavell's advance from December, 1940, and in January they were formed into the Inshore Squadron under the command of Captain H. Hickling, R.N. It was composed of the monitor *Terror*, armed with two 15-inch guns, a veteran of the Belgian coast in the last war (the *Terror* was sunk by bombing in February); three river gunboats from the China Station, the *Aphis*,



BATTERED TOBRUK. Wrecked Italian ships lie in the harbour, where a naval rating is on duty at Admiralty House. To this back door of the fortress, throughout the 242 days of the siege, ships of the Inshore Squadron brought supplies for the garrison isolated by Rommel's advance to the frontier.

Ladybird and Gnat, to which was later added a fourth, the Cricket ; the armed boarding steamers Chakla and Fiona ; three Italian ships captured off the coast, the ketch Zingarella, the schooner Maria Giovanna, and the motor vessel Tiberio, all of about 250 tons ; minesweepers and patrol craft and such destroyers as were available from operations elsewhere. Before the period now to be described began, Captain A. L. Poland, D.S.C., R.N., had relieved Captain Hickling in the Squadron's command.

The Navy's main tasks now, in the African theatre of war, were the supply of stores and equipment, food, petrol and ammunition to the Tobruk garrison, and also the maintenance of the ports of Tobruk and Mersa Matruh where Commander H. R. M. Nicholl, R.N., was in charge.

The enemy was now in possession of air bases along the coast from Benghazi to the Egyptian frontier. One R.A.F. wing was left at Tobruk, but on 24th April this also was withdrawn. Not only were the harbours of Tobruk and Mersa Matruh liable to incessant aerial attack, but convoys between Alexandria and Tobruk had no defence, once they were beyond the protection of fighters, other than the guns of their escorts.

The scale of air attacks on Tobruk during April did in fact reach such a point that supply by merchant ships had to be temporarily suspended. The merchant vessel Bamora was hit and set on fire forward. The trawler Moy, commanded by Lieutenant V. G. Palmer, R.N., went alongside her. Chief Stoker Matthew Richardson donned a home-made breathing apparatus, consisting of a gas mask face-piece and a length of diver's air pipe, and thus accoutred hung head downward over the fire and applied a hose to the flames. A messmate, Chief Stoker Joseph Surtees, held on to his legs and a stoker pumped the requisite amount of air during this feat which lasted three-quarters of an hour and put the fire out. The Bankura, Draco and Urania received

direct hits and stranded on the bottom of the harbour. Admiralty House was extensively damaged, the hospital twice deliberately bombed. The hospital ship Vita was also dive-bombed as she was leaving harbour. After vainly attempting to tow her, the Australian destroyer Waterhen embarked her patients and nurses and took them to Alexandria.

The fate of the Vita and, earlier, of the Dorsetshire, showed that even hospital ships did the Tobruk run at peril of their survival. The Aba survived three trips, the Llandoverly Castle seven. The Ramb IV, full of sick and wounded, was torpedoed after her eighth trip. The Somersetshire completed the round dozen and came to the same end. It was the atrocious logic of total warfare, carried to the limit of inhumanity. Admiral Cunningham, leaving the scene of the Battle of Matapan, made a signal to the Chief of the Italian Naval Staff giving him the position of survivors sighted on rafts to enable him to send hospital ships to their rescue. This was Italy's answer.

The boarding steamer Chakla was also sunk in the harbour. She was one of four ships of the British India Steam Navigation Company chartered as boarding steamers and supply carriers under the White Ensign. Her sisters, the Chantala (Lieutenant-Commander C. E. I. Gibbs, R.N.), the Chakdina (Lieutenant-Commander W. R. Hickey, R.N.R.) and the Fiona (Commander L. Griffiths, R.N.R.), were all destined to share her fate in due course. It was said that when the last struggled sinking into Tobruk, the Chakla's bows projecting above water, wore a sisterly grin of welcome.

Enemy aircraft had things by no means all their own way. Until 24th April, when the R.A.F. Wing moved east, 42 were shot down by Hurricanes, and upwards of 30 by the Inshore Squadron and ground defences. Minesweeping went on continuously. Moored, magnetic and acoustic mines were dealt with by the corvette Gloxinia, the sweepers Fareham and Soika and the trawlers Milford Countess and Moy,

under repeated bombing attacks in which they all sustained more or less damage and casualties. An enemy battery started to shell the harbour from the coast outside the perimeter. The Ladybird and the Greyhound went off after it like a couple of rather ill-assorted terriers slipping out on a quiet ratting expedition together.

At the same time the Aphis and the Gnat nosed about the coast further east trying to find out what the enemy was up to at Bardia and Sollum. Lieutenant-Commander J. O. Campbell, D.S.C., R.N., of the Aphis, with his tendency to get as near as possible inshore, actually landed at Bardia in the dark and found himself reconnoitring the same pier as a number of Germans, who were happily unaware of his presence in their midst. Lieutenant-Commander S. R. H. Davenport, R.N., took the Gnat to Sollum, where he bombarded the village and subsequently nearly fell a victim to a booby trap. Sighting what appeared to be a British officer on the shore road, he closed and sent a skiff in to establish contact. An enemy battery opened fire and the Gnat was slightly damaged by hits and near-misses. She withdrew out of range to effect repairs and then returned to attack the battery.

The heavy losses in merchant ships decided the Commander-in-Chief to substitute destroyers, tank landing craft and schooners for carrying supplies to Tobruk and bringing away wounded and prisoners of war. The Zingarella proved unequal to the wear and tear of the Tobruk "tramlines" and was withdrawn early for an engine refit; but the Maria Giovanna and the Tiberio, and a flotilla of sailing schooners of which the most famous was the Syrian Kheir-el-Dine commanded by Lieutenant R. B. McAusland, R.N.R., between them carried to Tobruk over 1,400 tons of supplies. Manned by naval ratings, there was about all their exploits a disdain of the enemy and a contempt for death that had a fine Elizabethan flavour; it is said that even gold earrings were not unknown among them.

The Maria Giovanna was under command of Lieutenant A. B. Palmer, R.N.R. He required of his ship's company three things—that they should work like blacks while work was necessary, shoot straight, and fight as long as they were conscious. He had only one punishment, dismissal from the ship, and his infrequent despatches, masterpieces of the laconic recording of essentials, invariably concluded in the same way:

No complaints.

No requestmen.

No defaulters.

An extract from the Maria Giovanna's log has survived, and gives an adequate picture of the service performed by this little ship while she was a unit of the Inshore Squadron.

Leaving Alexandria with 211 tons of food, ammunition, ordnance, canteen supplies and mail, she sighted in the dusk a submarine on the surface, and receiving no reply to her challenge, proceeded to try to ram. Her speed, being five knots, proved insufficient for the manœuvre and the submarine dived. She reappeared later on the port bow and revealed herself to be British. She may be suspected of pulling the Maria Giovanna's leg, which if true was naughty of her.

The following day the Maria Giovanna arrived at Mersa Matruh: *Hands to swim and recreation* records the log. The nature of the recreation is not stated. The Jervis, Hotspur and Aphis were in the harbour; perhaps they had a cricket match. Anyhow, they had an air raid soon after midnight and that kept them busy for two and a half hours. They spent the morning restowing the cargo and overhauling their life-saving gear, and after dinner piped *Hands to make and mend clothes* to make up for their lost sleep. She sailed for Tobruk at 3 p.m. in heavy weather. By 7 p.m. the ship was rolling so heavily that the main fuel tank sheered its moorings and nearly went through the ship's side. All hands were employed securing it. *Sea angry, shipped several good ones into engine room, all*

cabins flooded, observed the log at midnight, adding, at 8 a.m., *Dawn brings little relief from this heavy sea, and continual rolling, sky clear, all hands alert for air attack.* They sighted a Blenheim just before noon. *We waved to each other,* records Lieutenant Palmer, and at midnight added *All's well, heading towards the minefields and Tobruk.* At 6 a.m. they were alongside and unloading. At 7 a.m. the bombing started. They had nineteen raids during the day. The largest—eighteen Stukas supported by ten fighters, made a dead-set at the Maria Giovanna. A lighter alongside was sunk and the pier damaged. The schooner escaped with her shrouds severed, the ship's side holed in several places, wheelhouse damaged, lavatory and wireless room destroyed.

She sailed at 10 p.m. and an hour later passed two destroyers going in the opposite direction. Lieutenant Palmer permits himself a touch of humour. *Their speed flatters us* soliloquised the log dryly. The sea rose, threatening to poop them. One can picture

the tired captain in his wrecked wheelhouse glancing back under the reeling stars at the wave crests curving over them in the darkness, and presently bending over his log with a stump of pencil in the dim glow of a shaded lantern. *Had to alter course to avoid a running sea fight, not being a vessel of the line this was thought the most prudent move.* The log had become a confessional where he excused himself from turning away from any danger that could conceivably menace the Maria Giovanna, even the threat of a gale abaft his quarter. Next day the wind dropped and they had their first hot meal since leaving Matruh. *Very acceptable to all hands.* That afternoon they engaged an Italian Savoia 79; after a ten-minute action during which a window in the schooner got broken, the Savoia perhaps realised he had caught a Tartar and sheered off. *Consider we handed out more than we received. Pluto our dog sprained his ankle getting out of the way.*

The following morning they turned out and cleaned the ship in readiness for entering



THE CAPTURE OF THE MARIA GIOVANNA. Three Italian ships intercepted off North Africa in January, 1941, became useful additions to the Inshore Squadron. One of them, the schooner Maria Giovanna, is shown in this Langmaid painting, with White Ensign flying above the Italian flag, just after her capture.

harbour. Then they did some target practice at balloons. *Each man has five shots, it keeps them O.K.* And so, at 9 p.m., six eventful days after leaving it, she re-entered Alexandria harbour. *Entered and berthed alongside, records the log.* And below, as if from force of habit,

*No complaints.
No requestmen.
No defaulters.*

Sub-Lieutenant I. H. Laing, R.N.R., who commanded the Tiberio, seems to have been of one mind with the captain of the Maria Giovanna. In one of his reports—which incidentally differs little from the Maria Giovanna's in point of economy of words—Sub-Lieutenant Laing mentions an attack on the Tiberio by four Messerschmitt 109s. One was shot down and another retired damaged. The remaining two made four more runs over the schooner and disappeared. *After the second run over, G. Duff, A.B., told me that he had been hit. I told him to carry on and do his best. Duff, though wounded in the head and knee, continued to fire his Lewis gun until too weak to hold it, and then started to reload the empty drums.*

On another occasion two Heinkel 111s were sighted. By altering course to the westward the Tiberio bluffed them into the belief that she was an Italian vessel proceeding from Derna to Bardia; whereupon they formed up solicitously as an aerial escort while the Tiberio's propped themselves against their guns and wept in each other's arms for joy. A patrolling Blenheim sighted the party and, disliking the combination of schooner and Heinkels, attacked the latter and bombed the Tiberio. "A joke's a joke," said the Tiberio's, "but this is carrying things a bit too far!" and retaliated with such good will that the Blenheim had some difficulty in getting home.

May brought little relief from either bombing or minelaying from aircraft. The minesweepers Svana, Skudd III, Arthur Cavanagh, Aurora and Stoke were again continually harassed at work by shellfire

from an enemy shore battery, until the Gnat sallied out and silenced it. The Stoke was sunk by a heavy bombing attack, and on 12th May the Ladybird was attacked in harbour by nearly 50 aircraft. She was hit twice and sank at her moorings, ablaze, with every gun in action to the last. The survivors were picked up by harbour craft and included her captain, Commander J. F. Blackburn, R.N. He had a reputation for imperturbable courage even in those blast-swept waters where brave men went daily about their occasions.

The whaler Southern Maid and the sloop Grimsby, escorting the s.s. Helka with petrol and water for Tobruk, were twice attacked by dive-bombers. The first attack was made by five Junkers 88s. Bombs fell near the Helka and the Grimsby but did no damage. The Southern Maid was machine-gunned, but hit two of her attackers. The second attack came two hours later. The Helka was struck by two bombs both of which burst in the water tank. The ship broke in two, each half containing bulk petrol. The engines, being in the after half, continued to propel it through the water, while most of the crew remained clinging to the forepart. Having stopped the engines, the officers and engineers lowered boats and rescued them. The Grimsby, under the command of Commander K. J. D'Arcy, R.N., shot down two planes and was herself hit twice and presently sank, having transferred wounded and survivors to boats and rafts.

All this time the Southern Maid, commanded by Lieutenant D. A. Hall, South African Seaward Defence Force, zig-zagging at full speed to and fro across the bows of the convoy, engaged the attackers with every gun on board. One was shot down and several hit. When they withdrew she collected all the survivors and made for Mersa Matruh.

The Southern Maid was one of four armed whalers belonging to the S.A. Seaward Defence Force, commanded and manned by

South African officers and men. They were primarily intended for anti-submarine patrol work, but throughout the siege of Tobruk they combined these duties with convoy escort work. The Southern Floe was sunk early, but the remainder of the flotilla, the Southern Maid, Southern Isles and Southern Sea, operating under the command of Lieutenant-Commander A. F. Trew, S.A.S.D.F., did valiant service throughout; their discipline, their morale, and, above all, their marksmanship were unequalled in the Inshore Squadron.

Three days after her return to Alexandria the Southern Maid set out again in another attempt to get petrol and water to Tobruk. This time it was carried in the s.s. Pass of Balmaha with the sloop Auckland as the other escort vessel. Although twice attacked, once by bombers and once by Messerschmitt rogs, they brought their convoy through this time. Four of the Southern Maid's crew were wounded, one of the machine-gun crew mortally so.

The s.s. Pass of Balmaha, commanded by Captain P. G. Bell, was again escorted by the Auckland and the Australian sloop Parramatta on her next voyage to Tobruk with bulk petrol. Late in the afternoon of the second day the little convoy was attacked by three formations of Junkers 88s, sixteen in each formation. The Auckland drew the main weight of the attack while the remainder dived on the Parramatta and the Pass of Balmaha. They came sweeping out of the sinking sun through the heaviest barrage the sloops could fling in their path. The Auckland was hit and hit again; and then a huge explosion lifted her and dropped her blazing and with a broken back.

Commander M. S. Thomas, D.S.O., R.N., late of the Dainty, and captain of the now sinking Auckland, ordered the boats to scatter and asked the Parramatta to withdraw to seaward until dark. The crew of the Pass of Balmaha, which had been damaged by near-misses, took to their boats, as their ship was helpless and carried 700 tons of petrol. In

this fashion they drifted, watching the setting sun, awaiting the darkness that would be their salvation. As the sun sank towards the horizon back came the bombers in waves. The Parramatta, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander J. H. Walker, M.V.O., R.A.N., fought like a hell-cat in defence of her charge; she shot down two of the attackers and succeeded in preserving the tanker from further damage. When night fell she collected the Auckland's survivors, and the captain and crew of the Pass of Balmaha climbed back on board their ship. The destroyer Waterhen, despatched from Tobruk, arrived later and towed her and her valuable cargo into Tobruk. Five days later the Waterhen (Lieutenant-Commander J. H. Swain, R.N.) was herself bombed by aircraft in company with the Defender. The latter attempted to tow her stricken consort, but she eventually capsized and sank. The Defender met the same fate on 12th July when on patrol in company with the Vendetta, who also made unavailing attempts to tow her to Matruh.

Yet against the sombre background of these sinkings and this sacrifice, there burns like a flame the determination of the Inshore Squadron to play its part in holding Tobruk, while a ship remained afloat to carry petrol, food and ammunition to the defenders.

With the Inshore Squadron are numbered the small ships of the Merchant Navy who plied to and fro between Alexandria, Mersa Matruh and Tobruk. Up and down that featureless, unlighted coast they ran the gauntlet of submarines, dive-bombers and torpedo-carrying aircraft through waterways sown with mines. The petrol and ammunition carriers knew that one direct hit meant almost certain death for the crew. They made the perilous trip not once, but again and again without respite because they were so few.

It must be remembered that these men did not take up the sea as a profession with any of this in their minds, as did their naval

brethren; yet Admiral Cunningham wrote in a despatch to the Admiralty dealing with their exploits: "It was on these small ships, some of them very old, that the chief burden fell. As always they did magnificently." It was a word he used sparingly.

In all her long sea story Britain has seldom seen the like of them before. They were not all British. Some were Greek and some Egyptian and one was Dutch and one was French. They were manned by Danes and Poles, Greeks and Dutchmen, and the captain of one was a Free German.

Their names should not lightly be forgotten because when Lloyd's Shipping Register reappears few of them will still be there. The bulk tankers, *Pass of Balmaha* and *Helka*, *Adinda*, *Athene* and *Toneline*—the last commissioned under the *White Ensign*—the cased-petrol carriers *Zeeland* and *Kirkland*, *Kistna* and *Calderon*, *Volo* and *Cerion*. The store carriers *Gibel Kebir*, *Empire Patrol*, *Miranda*, *Elpis*, *Lesbos*, *Hanne*, *Warsawa* and *Trajanus*.

During May and June, while air attacks on Tobruk were at their height, the bulk of the supplies were carried by destroyers and tank landing craft. It was a service that called for the highest qualities of navigation and seamanship, the run being done at night at high speed along an unlighted coast. A green light * marked the entrance to the harbour, but once inside they had to berth alongside wharfs in complete darkness after negotiating a harbour strewn with wrecks. The naval base parties had then to secure ships and lighters, discharge the cargoes and get the ships away again all without lights. The destroyers available belonged mainly to the Australian flotilla under the command of Captain H. M. L. Waller, R.A.N., supplemented later by destroyers from all the Mediterranean flotillas.

* It was originally the starboard bow light of one of the ships wrecked in the harbour. When replaced by a more up-to-date contrivance this lantern was transferred to the destroyers' depot ship where it stands in the lobby outside the Admiral's cabin. It is lit at sunset.

The names *Hero*, *Decoy*, *Hotspur*, *Hasty* and others of the older destroyers soon became familiar to those of both Army and Navy concerned with unloading the supplies vital to their existence. Later the more modern destroyers of Captain Mack's 14th Flotilla and the 7th Flotilla joined in and became almost as well known.

The enemy, emulating the technique of the wreckers of romantic fiction, tried to lure ships ashore with a false green light to the eastward of Tobruk. The *Tiberio* nearly fell a victim to the trick, but was warned by hearing the sound of surf where no surf should have been and promptly extinguished the light with gunfire.

Between June and November the destroyers alone accomplished 185 runs to Tobruk, landed 22,500 men and brought back 26,400. In addition, they carried 5,700 tons of stores, ammunition and mails.

The Australian destroyers of the 10th Flotilla were gradually withdrawn and returned to their own home waters. When finally at the end of August the *Stuart* left, the only two of the original Inshore Squadron Flotilla that remained were the *Vendetta* and the *Decoy*. The *Wryneck* and the *Diamond* were sunk almost alongside each other during the withdrawal of the Army from Greece. The *Hereward* went at Crete.

On the departure of the *Stuart*, Admiral Cunningham made the following signal to the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board:

"It is with great regret that we part with H.M.A.S. *Stuart* from the Mediterranean Station. Under the distinguished command of Captain Waller she has an unsurpassed record of gallant achievement. She has taken a leading part in all the principal operations of the Mediterranean Fleet and has never been called upon in vain for any difficult job. The work of her engine room department in keeping this old ship efficient and in good running order has been beyond all praise.

"The Mediterranean Fleet is the poorer by the departure of this fine little ship and her gallant ship's company."

The *Vendetta*, the last of the Australians, followed her at the end of October.



SUPPLIES FOR THE FORTRESS. A destroyer loaded with stores for the garrison makes the dangerous run from Alexandria to besieged Tobruk.

The tank landing craft, A-lighters as they were called, square-nosed, unwieldy craft on board which living conditions must reach almost the highest degree of discomfort attainable afloat, were commanded by officers of the Royal Naval Reserve and Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve under Lieutenant R. P. Pattman, R.N.V.R., Senior Officer of the Western Desert Lighter Force. They plied between Matruh and Tobruk, and carried during the siege a total of

3,500 tons of stores, ammunition and petrol, 60 tanks and 330 personnel.

There were ten lighters employed on this service, of which two were lost in July—the A.10 (Sub-Lieutenant J. D. Thom, R.N.V.R.) and the A.8. They fell victims to a dive-bombing attack on passage, and the latter's commanding officer, Sub-Lieutenant R. M. Wright, R.N.V.R., and half his crew were killed.

In August, when Lieutenant A. S. Mullins,

R.N.R., was taking the A.14 into Tobruk Harbour, she detonated a mine when within a few yards of her moorings. The A.2 (Sub-Lieutenant E. L. Clark, R.N.V.R.) and the A.7 (Sub-Lieutenant A. C. Bromley, R.N.V.R.) after a spirited action with an enemy submarine on their way to Tobruk, were lost with all hands, on their return voyage. Sub-Lieutenant L. D. Peters, R.N.V.R., in the A.18, a veteran of the evacuation of Greece, also engaged this submarine. In all the period of their employment only one A-lighter turned back on account of weather, and their senior officer wrote of them: "It is a long jump from garage mechanic at trade union hours to a seven knot crawl in the proverbial 'bomb alley' with ears singing and shaking like a jelly, but there were few who found it as bad as they expected and all did a difficult job well."

The little maids-of-all-work were, however, the anti-submarine patrol vessels. Two of them, the Kos 19 and the Kos 21, were under the command of Lieutenants J. Scott, R.N.V.R., and A. R. J. Tilston, R.N.R., respectively. The Kos 21 was one of the few "little ships" that succeeded in struggling back from Crete. She was sunk in October while towing a D-lighter to Tobruk; although hit by a large, armour-piercing bomb, there was only one casualty. The last left, the Kos 19, was subsequently renamed the Cocker.

The Falk (Lieutenant H. S. Upperton, R.N.R.) and the Klo (Lieutenant H. K. Hill, R.C.N.V.R.) bore charmed lives and survived innumerable near-misses. They were trawlers, as were the Thorgrim (Lieutenant J. B. Sparks, R.N.R.) and the Thorbryn (Lieutenant-Commander J. Hall, R.N.R.). The latter, towing two D-lighters from Mersa Matruh to Tobruk in August, was attacked by three enemy aircraft and sunk. The two lighters drifted ashore in enemy territory, and it is not known whether they succeeded in picking up any of the Thorbryn's survivors.

There was no task, from submarine hunting to escorting or towing, these six little ships did not undertake with cheerful competence. The Kos 19 earned a letter of congratulation from the Commander-in-Chief for "excellent seamanship" on the part of the commanding officer and ship's company.

Amongst a heterogeneous collection of harbour craft, one stands out for mention, because of the strange quality of certain craft for inspiring seamen with affection. This was a small sponge-fishing vessel, which was manned by naval ratings and commanded by Petty Officer Wilson. She was called the Eskimo Nell.

9. The Little Ships Go

Forward

JULY—DECEMBER, 1941

THE A.A. SHORE defences at Tobruk were gradually strengthened and eventually made daylight attacks by dive-bombers unprofitable. They then drove off the high-level bombers, and finally the night bombers. This is believed to be the first occasion in war in which A.A. gun defence alone, unassisted by fighters, has defeated the enemy's air effort. In July, running store ships to Tobruk was resumed, and the garrison tasted the almost forgotten luxury of fresh meat.

To some extent frustrated in aerial attacks on the harbour, the enemy employed three artillery batteries in shelling it instead. Damage and casualties were slight, although the Canadian sweeper Skudd III, manned

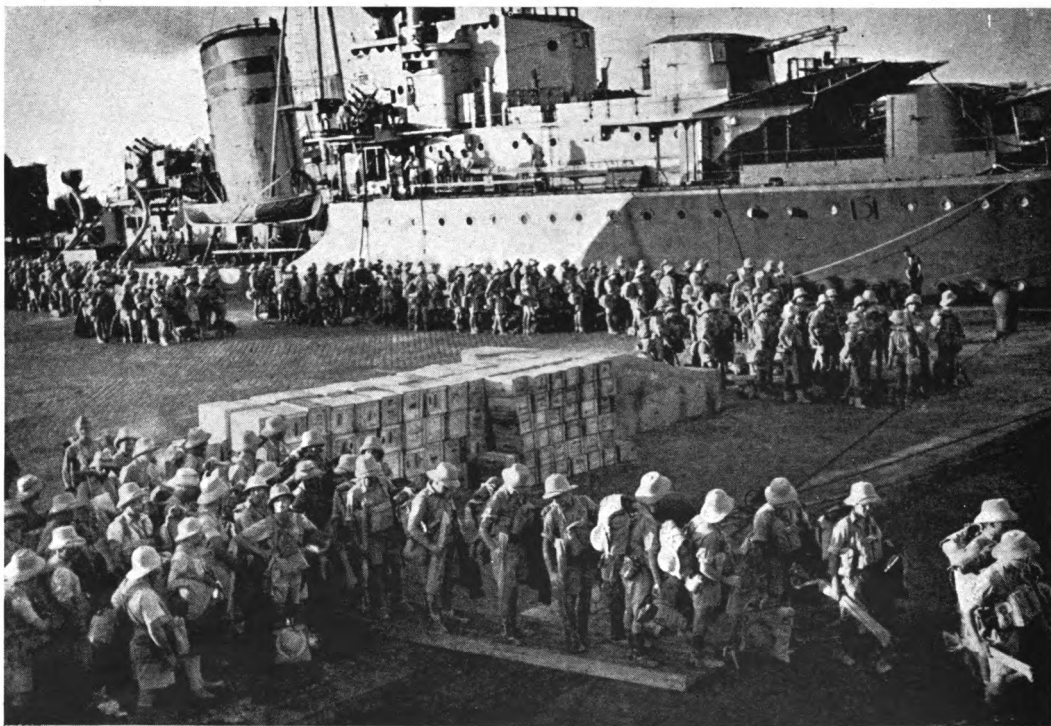
mainly by Newfoundlanders, suffered damage and lost a man killed and another wounded. The enemy frequently used a spotting aircraft, and in this way was able to pursue ships with salvos of shells. The naval tug C.307, commanded by Lieutenant J. Johnson, R.N.R., was being relieved by the tug Jeddah, after some 2,000 hours steaming (mostly on salt water feed !). The newcomer attracted the attention of Bardia Bill's battery on arrival and was chased round the harbour trying to find a berth where she was inaccessible to the Italian gunners.

This nuisance was eventually dealt with in a combined operation between the Royal Artillery within the perimeter, Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm and the ubiquitous Aphis. The results were all that could be wished for, and when, after a considerable lull, shelling of

Tobruk recommenced, it was never again on the same scale.

When possible, changes were made periodically to rest the personnel. Commander F. M. Smith D.S.O., R.D., R.N.R., who had been promoted to captain, was temporarily relieved by Commander H. R. M. Nicholl from Mersa Matruh in July; Captain Smith resumed command at Tobruk in October. Filling a role never contemplated in peace-time, the naval shore parties and the crews of the tugs and lighters lived and worked side by side with the Army, sharing its rations and the discomfort of a life in dug-outs, enduring sandstorms, flies, brackish water, bully-beef, ceaseless shelling or bombing and the complete absence of recreation in any shape or form.

In August it was decided to relieve the



RELIEF FOR THE GARRISON. In August, 1941, 6,120 Polish infantry were landed in Tobruk and 5,000 Australians brought away. The transfer was achieved by a succession of runs. Polish troops are seen embarking at an Egyptian port; in the background a destroyer lies alongside the quay.

18th Brigade of the 7th Australian Infantry Division by the Polish Independent Brigade Group. It was arranged to transfer them in a succession of runs by the minelayers Abdiel (Captain The Hon. E. Pleydell-Bouverie, M.V.O., R.N.) and Latona (Captain S. L. Bateson, R.N.) alternately, each accompanied by three destroyers. The Greek m.v. Lesbos was to make two trips with stores and the Pass of Balmaha one with petrol. The Lesbos received damage in an air raid and was unable to carry out her second run. The Wolborough, a trawler converted into a store ship, and the Maria Giovanna were substituted. The destroyers employed were the Jervis (wearing the flag of Rear-Admiral Glennie), Jackal, Kipling, Kandahar, Kimberley, Kingston, Hasty, Nizam and Griffin, covered by cruisers of the 7th and 15th Cruiser Squadrons.

This operation, involving the transfer of 6,120 Polish infantry and 1,400 tons of stores to Tobruk and the withdrawal of 5,000 Australians (including wounded), was carried out between 19th August and 29th August. Some shelling occurred, and there were dive-bombing attacks on several nights, during which, in a raid by 40 dive bombers, the Skudd III was sunk. The Commander-in-Chief signalled to Commander Nicholl : "I very much regret the loss of Skudd III after all her useful work at Tobruk and particularly regret the casualties that have been suffered."

The following month a similar operation was carried out to relieve further units of the Tobruk garrison with British troops. This took place with little interference from the enemy, and resulted in 2,100 tons of stores, 6,000 men and 40 tanks being run into Tobruk. A further 6,000 time-expired troops were brought away.

In October a final relief of the garrison was completed. The command of the fortress was handed over by the 9th Australian Division to the 70th Division. The minelayer Latona was bombed and sunk in the course of this operation ; the Pass of Balmaha (now

commanded by Captain S. K. Hardy) and the Samos (Captain E. Kailes) were torpedoed and lost, the former with all hands. The Tiberio struggled into harbour 24 hours overdue, with a cargo of cased petrol, after a bombing attack at sea which her commanding officer permitted himself to describe as 'mighty close and from a low height'. As a result of this attack her engine was temporarily disabled and she drifted on a westerly current towards the hostile coast of the Gulf of Bomba, where she attracted the attention of mobile artillery.

Enemy submarine activity increased in October and on the 21st, on passage to Alexandria, the Gnat was torpedoed and her bows blown off. The Griffin took her in tow stern first and eventually, escorted by the Southern Maid, she reached Alexandria. For this fine piece of seamanship the Griffin (Commander J. Lee Barber, R.N.) was congratulated by the Commander-in-Chief.

The Cricket, a late addition to the gunboat strength, was paid off almost at once on account of defective engines. An attempt to weld the Gnat's stern on to the Cricket's bows proved beyond local resources : local entomologists were thus spared the nice problem of having to decide what variety of insect the resulting hybrid represented, and of naming it accordingly.

The military situation remained comparatively static throughout the first seven months of the siege, but a large-scale British offensive was planned for November. Naval co-operation was required for the supply of water and petrol, and for the clearance of mines and obstructions from harbours as they were reoccupied.

The orders issued by the Naval Commander-in-Chief to the Fleet commenced with the preamble :

"The Eighth Army under Lieutenant-General Sir Alan G. Cunningham, K.C.B., D.S.O., M.C., intend shortly to drive the enemy out of Cyrenaica."

and at dawn on 18th November, 1941, the

tank forces moved forward from Fort Maddalena. That same night the Halfaya fortifications were bombarded by the cruisers Naiad and Euryalus escorted by destroyers, and spotting aircraft reported satisfactory destruction of enemy tanks. The British armoured brigades pushed forward without encountering serious opposition until they reached Sidi Rezegh. Here they met enemy concentrations; South African and New Zealand troops were brought up in support, and the armoured battle was joined in earnest.

At dawn on the 21st, the Tobruk garrison, after a feint attack on the western side of the perimeter, breached the enemy's defence ring in the south-east and advanced seven miles through minefields and elaborate defences. They reached half-way to El Duda, where they had hoped to effect a junction with the Eighth Army; but as the New Zealanders advancing from Gambut had been held up, this was impossible, and the 70th Division halted to consolidate its gains.

Owing to the fierce fighting around Tobruk after the garrison's sortie, ammunition became seriously short and the s.s. Hanne, one of the last survivors of the original Tobruk supply ships, was sent from Alexandria with a full cargo. She was escorted by the Parramatta, Avon Vale (a destroyer of the Hunt class) and the three "Southerns." The Parramatta was torpedoed by a submarine when 30 miles from Tobruk: she broke up almost immediately and about 140 of her crew are missing.

On the night of 22nd November, the Maria Giovanna was due to arrive at Tobruk, but dawn showed her aground to the westward outside the perimeter. The enemy were already unloading the cargo. How the gallant little ship met her end is not known. It is possible that she fell a victim to the false lights. Her officers and crew are prisoners of war.

The Zingarella had long ago dropped out of the running owing to engine defects, and, of these three captured Italian ships,

only the Tiberio remained—but not for long. Her steering gear broke down in a heavy gale and the cargo shifted. She tried to struggle into Matruh, but was caught by a heavy sea near the entrance to the harbour and capsized.

A large convoy of store ships waited at Alexandria in readiness to sail for Tobruk directly it was relieved.

By 23rd November, however, conditions at Tobruk were such that it was decided to sail the Glenroy, a store and troop carrier with a cargo of much needed lighters. Although she was sent under a powerful escort, the Glenroy was hit by an aircraft's torpedo. She was beached off Matruh and later towed to Alexandria for repair.

On 26th November, the Tobruk garrison made contact with the Eighth Army, but five days later the corridor was broken. They still continued, however, to hold a salient three miles wide and seven miles deep to the south of the perimeter. By 7th December, the enemy had withdrawn all his armoured, and most of his mobile forces from the area east of Tobruk and was reforming them in the Gazala area. In the course of the next day the Tobruk garrison advanced south to El Adem and joined the main forces late in the evening. On the 9th December, Tobruk was relieved after a land and air siege lasting 242 days.

During the period of the siege, men-of-war and merchantmen had carried out the entire maintenance of the garrison. They had between them transported 72 tanks, 92 guns, 34,000 tons of stores; 32,667 of the garrison were replaced during the siege by 34,113 fresh troops; 7,516 wounded and 7,097 prisoners of war were withdrawn. The cost to the Navy was 27 ships of all classes and degrees, and seven ships to the Merchant Navy. How far these losses were justified by the military gain will be for the historian to assess; but, as at Crete, the Navy and Merchant Navy paid the price unquestioningly and accepted without hesitation the burden of the odds.



THE MANCHESTER IS TORPEDOED. This picture and those on the two following pages were taken just after the cruiser Manchester had been struck below the waterline while escorting a convoy to Malta in July, 1941. Injured men are brought up on to the quarterdeck from below and laid in the shadow of the 6-inch gun turret.



Smothered in oil, rescuers and rescued come up from below. *Right*, the ship is listing heavily and a seaman steadies the drenched and exhausted officer of a rescue party. *Above*, his oil-soaked body glistening in the sunlight, a rescued man breathes in fresh air again. *Below*, a wounded man, who had been working in a shell room when the ship was struck, is made comfortable on deck.







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10. Scourge of the Axis Supplies

NOVEMBER—DECEMBER, 1941

THREE DAYS before the relief of Tobruk, Japan attacked Britain and the United States in the Pacific. On the night of 7th December, 1941, the two countries began hostilities against the new aggressor. The Western Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea were to know for the first time the rule of the Japanese Navy, for the crippling of the United States battle fleet at Pearl Harbour and the sinking of the Prince of Wales and Repulse temporarily deprived the Allies of the control of those vital waters.

Yet at this moment, looking westward from the Suez Canal—on the base line, as it were, between the new theatre of war and the old—there seemed to be a lightening at last in the sombre sky.

Following the relief of the Tobruk garrison, the Eighth Army was driving the Axis divisions back across Cyrenaica. Airfields in Cyrenaica would mean more fighter support for the convoys to Malta, and with the initiative in our hands there was no telling how far that air support might be extended. Uninterrupted supplies to Malta—petrol, ammunition, oil fuel—would mean the maintenance there of a striking force of surface craft, submarines and torpedo bombers, capable of paralysing the Axis supply line to Tripoli. It all interlocked in a most delicate equilibrium.

So bright was the promise of the future in the Western Desert, and so dire the menace in the Pacific, that it was decided a portion of Admiral Cunningham's forces must be

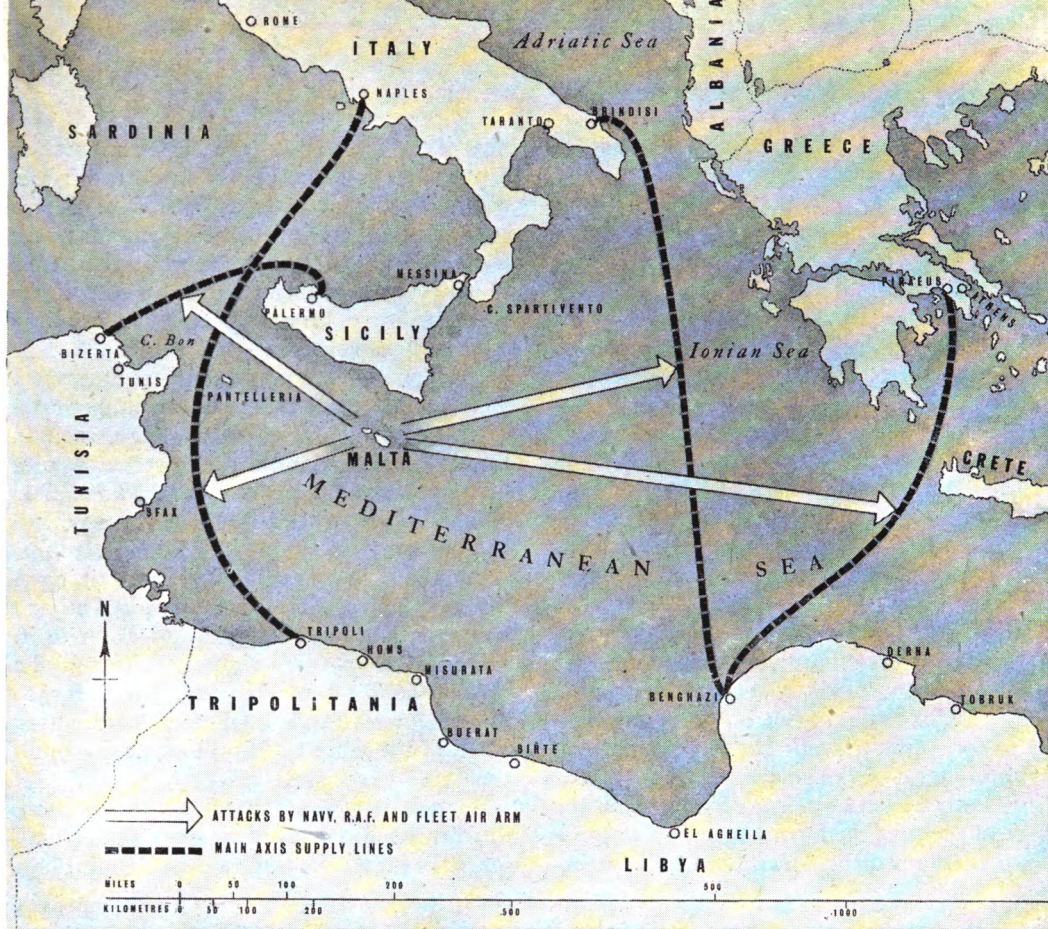
spared to reinforce the Eastern Fleet, although the sinking of the Ark Royal in the Western Mediterranean on 13th November and the loss of the battleship Barham, torpedoed by a U-boat on 25th November, had carried the safety margin almost to vanishing point. From the end of 1941 onward, it is a sober if slightly incredible fact that a small force of cruisers, submarines and destroyers and a mere handful of naval Albacores and Swordfish, held the Mediterranean against all the strength of Italy's fleet. While their numbers and other circumstances permitted, this force was divided between Malta and Alexandria. Their numbers dwindled and were augmented according to the fluctuating fortunes of war. At their best they might be described as appearing inadequate on paper.

It is necessary to go back to the beginning of November, 1941, to get a comprehensive picture of the cruiser warfare that occupied much of the succeeding year.

The cruiser force under the operational control of the Vice-Admiral, Malta, known as Force K, consisted at first of the cruisers Aurora and Penelope and the destroyers Lance and Lively. The Aurora's captain, Captain W. G. Agnew, R.N., was in command of the force. He had studied the tactics of intercepting and destroying enemy convoys, and had evolved a technique which, combined with deadly accuracy of gunnery, invested these actions with the impersonal brusque efficiency of a dental operation.

The 7th Cruiser Squadron, for all its brave title, consisted only of the Ajax and the Neptune. It was commanded by Rear-Admiral Rawlings with his flag in the Ajax. His qualities as a cruiser admiral have been revealed in the narrative of the battle for Crete. In the flexible form of sea warfare which is the role of the cruiser, he possessed to an almost uncanny degree the ability to interpret and put into effect the thoughts and purposes of the Commander-in-Chief he had served so long.

On 1st November Rear-Admiral P. L.



THE STRIKING POWER OF MALTA. When the Eighth Army opened its offensive in the Western Desert during November, 1941, it became necessary to concentrate all available striking forces against the supply lines of the enemy's main ports at Benghazi and Tripoli. As this map shows, Malta was perfectly situated for such attacks. In spite of heavy air raids, cruisers, destroyers and submarines were based there, and with aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm and Royal Air Force were able to inflict heavy losses on enemy shipping.

Vian, D.S.O., assumed command of the remaining cruiser squadron, "The Fighting Fifteenth" as it was destined to be known. The Naiad, Euryalus, Dido, Galatea composed it; the Admiral hoisted his flag in the Naiad.

In November, as we have just recalled, the Eighth Army had opened its offensive, and had speedily become locked in battle with the Afrika Korps. Benghazi was then the main enemy supply port, traffic plying there coastwise from Tripoli and across the western Ionian Sea from Brindisi. With the fate of Tobruk hanging in the balance, it

was necessary to concentrate Malta's striking power on these supply lines.

On 8th November, a reconnaissance aircraft from Malta reported a convoy of merchant ships and destroyers 40 miles to the eastward of Cape Spartivento, steering east. Force K slipped out of the Grand Harbour at Malta, and went off at high speed on a course which enabled them to intercept this convoy shortly after midnight. Captain Agnew led his force round to place the quarry against the moon; it was screened by four destroyers, and he headed for one that was guarding the rear of the

convoy. A couple of minutes later two more large ships, escorted by a pair of destroyers, were sighted away to the northward; they were "noted for future reference." At 5,700 yards, fire was opened on the destroyer originally selected. It was hit and disintegrated by the first three salvos.

From the moment of sighting the convoy until the first gun was fired, seventeen minutes elapsed. During this time the enemy seemed completely unconscious of the British force bearing down on them. A second destroyer was swiftly eliminated. The other two fled, while the convoy steamed on without attempting any alteration of course or speed, like a rabbit hypnotised by a stoat. Then, one by one, they in their turn were sunk or left blazing hulks. Two destroyers that were escorting the second convoy made a half-hearted sortie from a smoke screech, but on being engaged at 10,000 yards thought better of it and fled again under cover of smoke.

As Force K left the scene of action and the flare of the fires died away astern, a flashing lamp challenged the *Aurora* out of the dark-

ness of the sea. It was the British submarine *Upholder* lying in wait on the outskirts of the fight. After speaking with Force K she set course for the burning convoy. Towards dawn she hit an Italian destroyer with one of her four remaining torpedoes. Later, she fired the other three, torpedoing and sinking a second destroyer.

Ten enemy merchant ships were destroyed. They varied from a 10,000-ton tanker to a 4,000-ton ammunition ship. One, seen in the flare of the flames to be crammed with motor transport, was described by an excited lookout in the *Penelope* as being "lousy with charabancs."

Such was the co-ordination and training of the force that the Senior Officer, like a good huntsman, was content to leave them to it. He only made three signals: the tally-ho of a general alarm bearing, an order to reduce speed, and a merely perfunctory crack of the whip: "Don't waste ammunition."

Because it was a characteristic operation, this has been described in more detail than space permits for the remainder of Force



COMBING THE SEAS. In line ahead the destroyers *Kingston* and *Kimberley*, part of the force of cruisers and destroyers based on Malta, sweep the Mediterranean in search of the enemy.

K's achievements; but one more must be briefly recorded.

On 23rd November, the Force was again unleashed to intercept two ships carrying valuable cargoes from the Piraeus to Benghazi. The unsuspecting convoy was sighted on the afternoon of the next day. The two Italian destroyers composing the escort engaged the approaching cruisers at long range, and then, hit and hit again, fled to the northward and escaped from further damage in a rain squall, leaving the merchant ships to their fate. The crews of the latter then not unreasonably took to their boats. An air escort of Ju. 88s attacked with their bombs in a series of shallow dives which the British ships dodged effectively while they dealt with the merchantmen. Ten minutes of it sufficed. Both ships were quickly ablaze, collided helplessly with each other, and blew up.

This is the record of Force K for one month, one of the features of which was the co-ordination between the reconnaissance aircraft of the R.A.F., the lone submarine patrolling enemy harbour approaches, and the surface striking force. Had the vital cargoes of these twelve ships succeeded in reaching Libya and been dispersed, not all the bombing aircraft then available in the Middle East would have sufficed to seek out and destroy them. They might well have turned the scales at this juncture and given victory to Rommel. The lack of them helped General Ritchie to wrest the initiative from him.

One result of this devastating offensive was the reinforcement of his convoy escorts by the enemy, and the covering of them by reluctant sorties of the Italian battle fleet. Admiral Cunningham's answer was to send Admiral Rawlings to Malta with the Ajax and Neptune, and the destroyers Kingston and Kimberley to augment Force K.

They wasted no time. Almost under the noses of an Italian cruiser and destroyer force with a Cavour class battleship in support, they snapped up an ammunition

ship early on the morning of 1st December. The same afternoon they added a destroyer and a tanker to the bag, blowing all three of them sky high without damage or casualties, and scarcely wasting a shot. A Malta-based Wellington shared the honours of the kill, staying in the air long past its endurance time to place the cruisers on the target with absolute certainty. The submarine Thunderbolt helped earlier in the proceedings with a report from the remote and lonely vantage of some wave crest.

The dwindling fuel supplies at Malta were unequal to the demands of the reinforced cruiser squadron, and it became necessary to run the fast supply ship Breconshire across from Alexandria whenever it was possible. An attempt to intercept a convoy in the middle of the month by cruiser forces from both Malta and Alexandria was frustrated by the enemy turning back. The sortie was a costly one, as the Galatea was torpedoed by a U-boat when Admiral Vian was bringing the 15th Cruiser Squadron back to Alexandria.

Two days later the squadron sailed again, escorting the Breconshire. It had been arranged that Force K should meet them at a given rendezvous and take over the escort, enabling the 15th Cruiser Squadron to turn for home with an adequate reserve of fuel and ammunition. At the moment of juncture of the two British forces, however, enemy battleships were reported at sea to the northward with a convoy, and in avoiding contact with this overwhelmingly superior force, Admiral Vian found himself unexpectedly within range of another equally powerful formation that had contrived to escape the R.A.F. reconnaissance. The British cruisers came under a heavy and unpleasantly accurate fire. This had been preceded by attacks by twenty-five torpedo-bombers and about fifty high-level bombers, through which the Breconshire had somehow manœuvred unscathed. But in the face of this new menace Admiral Vian sent her to the south with two destroyers, the Decoy and the Havock, to screen her out of harm's way,

while he gathered his forces and moved out towards the enemy in the teeth of another attack by torpedo-bombers.

The enemy fleet consisted of two Cavour class battleships, an 8-inch cruiser squadron, and destroyers. It turned away and retreated. By using smoke to conceal the inferiority of his force, and by carrying out audacious feint attacks with all the gunfire at his command, Admiral Vian contrived to coax the enemy further and further away from the Breconshire. At length, deeming the worst of the danger over, he detached Force K to escort her safely to her destination. Under cover of darkness Admiral Vian extricated his remaining cruisers and returned to Alexandria; the Jervis, leader of the screening destroyers, disposed of an unwary U-boat on the passage.

The honours of war during this period when the British light forces swept like a scourge across the Italian lines of supply were not confined to the cruisers. The submarine flotillas based on Malta and Alexandria did even greater execution during their gallant and unobtrusive patrols in the Ionian Sea and elsewhere. In addition to the large number of merchant ships sunk, a Cavour class battleship was hit with three torpedoes by the Urge, the P.31 accounted for a 6-inch cruiser and the Talisman for a U-boat. 201 Group of the R.A.F. and the shore-based squadrons of the Fleet Air Arm kept up an unwearying offensive, co-operating with submarines and surface craft in reconnaissance and destruction.

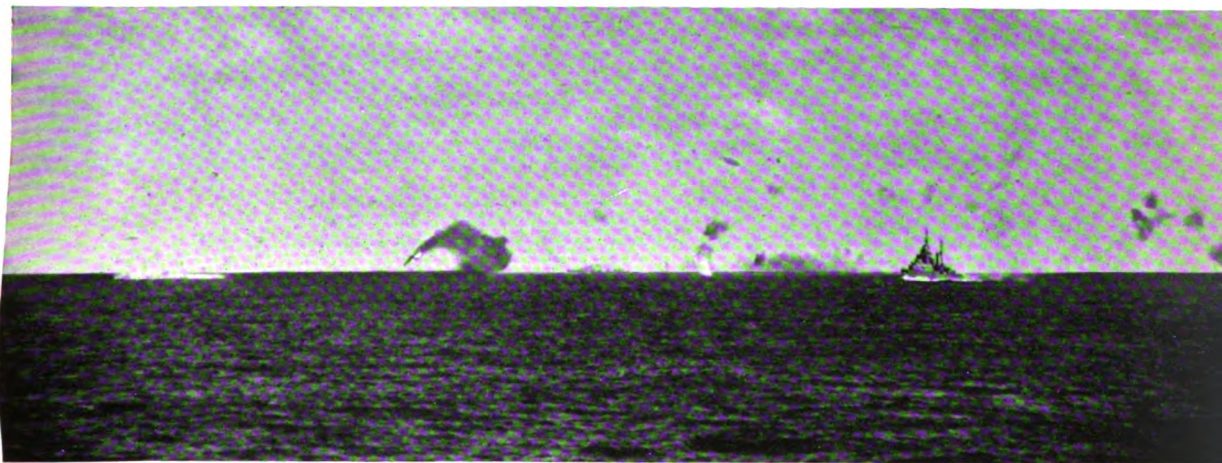
A reinforcing division of destroyers, consisting of the Sikh, Legion, Maori, and the Netherlands destroyer Isaac Sweers, led by Commander G. H. Stokes D.S.C., R.N., in the Sikh, one night intercepted an enemy force of two cruisers and two torpedo boats rounding Cape Bon. Lying close inshore, the destroyers contrived to remain unperceived against the dark loom of the land until the enemy was abeam; and then at a range of 1,000 yards the Sikh put two torpedoes into the leading cruiser. They wrapped her in

flames from bow to stern. The Maori finished her with another torpedo. Recovering from the shock of this surprise the second cruiser opened fire with her main armament. She managed to loose off one broadside that burst somewhat ineffectively on the shores of Cape Bon. Three salvoes from the Sikh and a torpedo amidships from the Legion then sent her to the bottom. In the mêlée of smoke and gunflashes the Legion did some rapid snap-shooting at a torpedo boat and sank her while the Isaac Sweers attacked the other, scoring a number of hits before she escaped in the darkness. It was characteristic of the night attacks by destroyers carried out at short range with dash and the deadly competence of well-handled weapons.

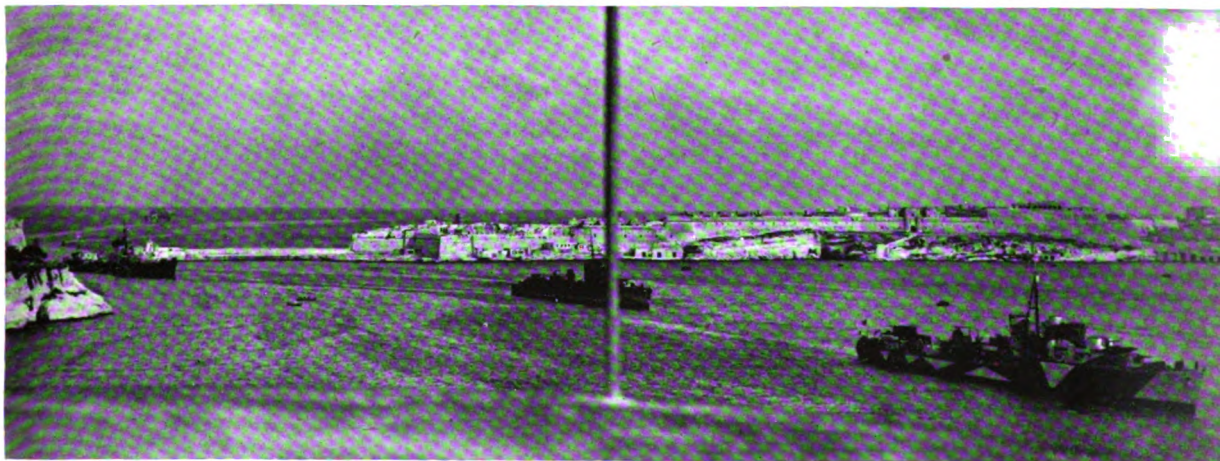
The cumulative effect of all this cruiser, submarine and destroyer activity had far-reaching consequences upon Italian morale, apart from the material losses it inflicted. But before the year ended the Fleet was to suffer a setback which, had we held the Mediterranean against a more resolute and enterprising foe, would have had the gravest consequences.

Three cruisers of Force K, the Neptune, Aurora and Penelope, screened by the destroyers Kandahar, Lance, Lively and Havock, had sailed to intercept an important enemy convoy bound for Tripoli. They were steaming south in single line when the leading ship, the Neptune, appeared for an instant dark against a flash of flame. As the concussion of an underwater explosion reached her, the Aurora, her next astern, hauled out to starboard, and next moment she too lifted to a staggering detonation as her paravane exploded a mine; two minutes later the Penelope followed suit. The cruiser force had run into a minefield in a depth of water and at a distance from land which made it utterly unexpected. It is what the sowers of minefields aim at, and in this case they had rung the bell with a vengeance.

The Aurora contrived to turn and steam out of the field without further catastrophe,



THE DASH FOR MALTA. The fast supply ship Breconshire with desperately needed stores for the island is seen in the top picture between two escorting cruisers. A heavy air attack is in progress and a bomb has fallen just astern of the Naiad, Admiral Vian's flagship. In the centre picture an Italian torpedo-bomber hit by gunfire plunges into the sea.



THE GOAL IS REACHED. The Breconshire, seen beyond the breakwater, approaches the entrance to Grand Harbour with an escort of destroyers, after evading units of the enemy battle fleet.



RUNNING THE GAUNTLET. A bomb bursts just clear of the cruiser *Naiad*, throwing a great mound of water into the air. Her high-angle guns are firing at the attacking aircraft. She was escorting a small convoy to Malta, in January, 1942.

followed by the *Penelope*; but in the meanwhile the *Neptune*, drifting helplessly, had struck two more mines in rapid succession.

Captain Agnew, in command in the *Aurora*, considered the situation in all its dire gravity. They were twenty miles from Tripoli and the dawn was not far distant. The *Aurora*'s speed was reduced to ten knots and his duty was to get her as far from the enemy coast as he could before daylight. The risk of sending another ship into the minefield to tow the *Neptune* out was not justified, but the need to save life made it imperative.

He therefore bade Commander Robson of the *Kandahar* detail one destroyer from his division to go alongside the *Neptune*, and two destroyers to escort the *Aurora* back to Malta. The *Penelope*, whose speed was not impaired, he ordered to stand by the *Neptune* in support, keeping clear of the minefield. His signal crossed one from Captain A. D. Nicholl, R.N., of the *Penelope*, whose ship was not badly damaged, asking to be allowed to remain.

Commander Robson, as senior officer of the division, judged it to be the prerequisite of the *Kandahar* to enter the mine-

field in an attempt to reach the *Neptune*, who was stubbornly preparing to be taken in tow. Captain Nicholl was also cautiously edging the *Penelope* towards her, when the *Kandahar* struck a mine and also became a victim of the invisible field. Captain R. C. O'Connor, R.N., commanding the *Neptune*, flashed a warning: "Keep away." A little while after that she struck a fourth mine and her doom was upon her. She turned over and slowly sank. Even this tragedy did not deter the *Lively* from a desperate attempt to reach the stricken *Kandahar*. "She has ordered me out of the field" was her indignant comment as she rejoined the *Penelope*.

Commander Robson looked at the eastern sky from the bridge of the crippled *Kandahar*, and made his last signal to the *Penelope*. "Suggest you should go," he said bluntly.

"I clearly cannot help," replied Captain Nicholl. "God be with you." And then to the *Lively*, "course 010°, speed 15 knots." But still her captain, Lieutenant-Commander W. F. E. Hussey, D.S.C., R.N., could not harden his heart. "Suggest I go for the *Neptune*'s survivors," he urged.

The reply came—"Regret not approved,"



MORE STRENGTH FOR MALTA. H.M.S. Cleopatra, sent out from Britain during February, 1942, to strengthen the cruiser force in the Mediterranean, enters Grand Harbour, Malta. A month later she became Admiral Vian's flagship when the Naiad was sunk by a U-boat.

and a little later—"I hate to leave them, but I am afraid we must."

And that was all there was to it.

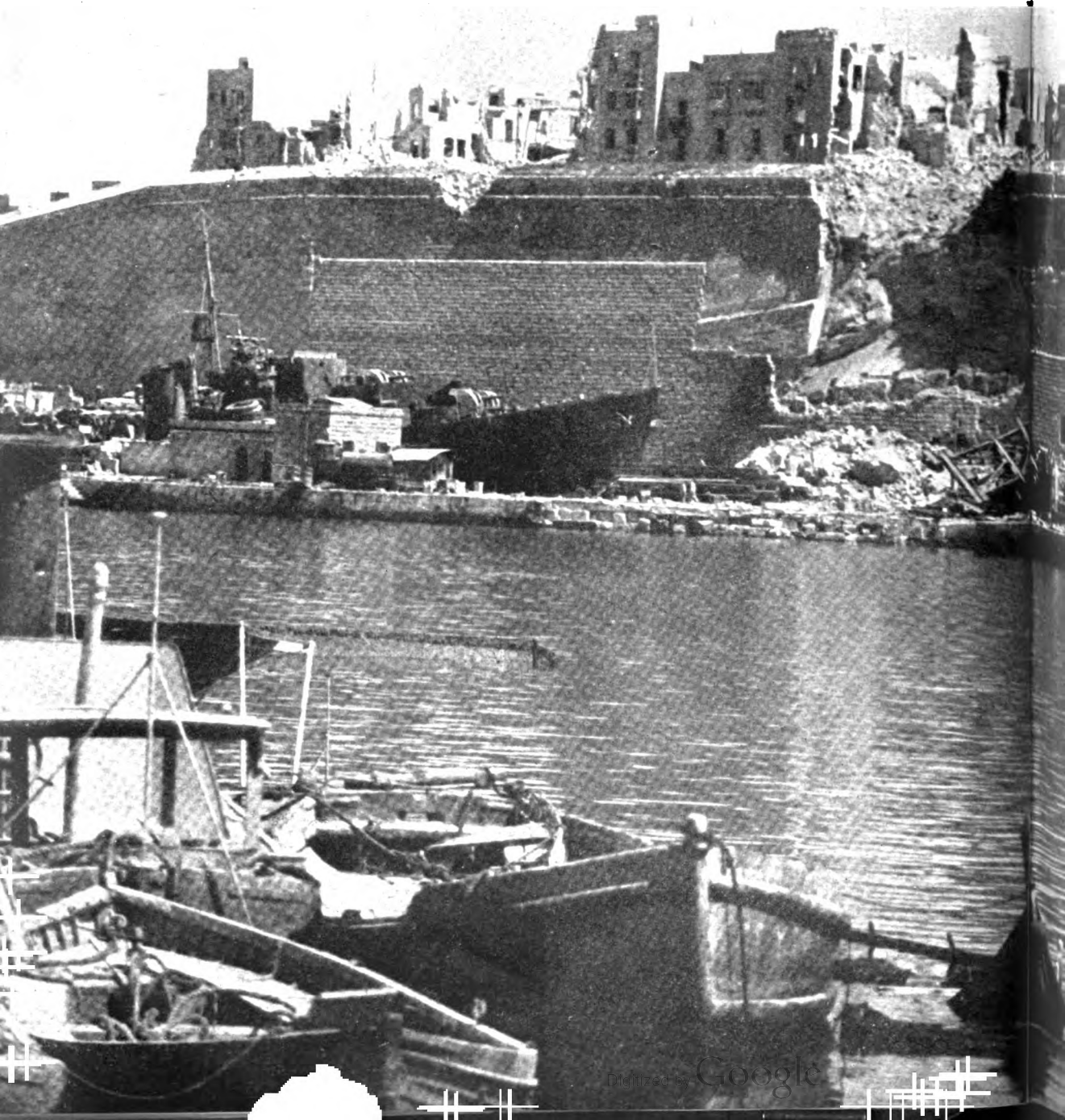
The dawn found the Kandahar still afloat, but submerged from abaft the funnel. Of possible survivors from the Neptune nothing could be seen. Commander Robson made preparations to sink his ship rather than let her fall into enemy hands if Italian surface forces should appear. A Ju. 88 had already had a look at them, circled the area, and flown away.

All day they waited, and with the darkness wind and sea rose. It carried the Kandahar clear of the minefield, but she had begun to list ominously. Then about 4 a.m., when perhaps they were beginning to feel a little lonely, the destroyer Jaguar appeared out of the darkness. Lieutenant-Commander L. R. K. Tyrwhitt, D.S.C., R.N., contrived to nurse his ship alongside bow to bow; few destroyer captains could better him at ship-handling, but in that wind and sea he could not hold her alongside the yawing, helpless Kandahar without grave risk to his own ship. He backed clear and signalled: "Can you swim for it?"

"We will swim," came the answer. And swim they did, eight officers and 170 ratings, and so were saved.


This mishap to Force K temporarily left the command of the Eastern and Central Mediterranean to what remained of the "Fighting Fifteenth"—the Naiad, Dido and Euryalus. At Gibraltar a small force of capital ships kept one eye on the Atlantic and the other on the Western Mediterranean, but when early in 1942 circumstances transferred them to Northern waters, Admiral Vian's cruisers were the only British force from Gibraltar to the Red Sea with a heavier armament than a destroyer.

Now, if ever, was Mussolini's chance to establish *Mare Nostrum*, with his five or six battleships, his 8-inch cruisers, his fresh destroyer flotillas. But probably he remembered every action in which his ships had fought the British. The British, who were known to be mad, liked, as far as he could judge, the odds against them. Admittedly, six battleships against a handful of cruisers should be long enough odds to satisfy the most morbid appetite. But you never knew. He decided to leave it to the Luftwaffe.



II. The Storm Breaks on Malta

JANUARY—MAY, 1942



MALTA WAS THE FOX gnawing into the vitals of Italy. It was Malta from which the British submarines slid out to take their toll of the Tripoli convoys ; Malta that sent the Swordfish and Wellingtons to swoop on the tankers and ammunition ships whose cargoes were the very life of the dwindling Italian empire ; Malta whose destroyers struck in the darkness and passed on unscathed, leaving death behind them.

But if Malta were eliminated then there could be no stopping supplies to Rommel. Then there would be no stopping Rommel—Egypt, Suez, even perhaps India, to join hands there with Japan. It must all have looked feasible from a railway siding on the Brenner Pass.

The plan, as it gradually unfolded itself before Maltese eyes, reddened with limestone dust and lack of sleep, was simple enough. Based on overwhelming air superiority with practically unlimited replacements, it aimed first of all at eliminating the island's airfields and fighter opposition ; then it was to be the turn of the dockyard and submarine base, the shipping and essential services of the harbours ; then would come the destruction of all stores, barracks and communications ; and, lastly, the mining of all approaches to the island so that no one could come to the island's succour. This programme, nicely rounded off, would then have put paid to Malta.

During December, 1941, January, 1942 (when Vice-Admiral Sir Ralph Leatham,



THE DESTRUCTION GROWS. In the dockyard, rapidly becoming a waste of rubble and twisted girders, the merchant vessel *Troilus*, *above*, is seen in dry dock, the wharf beside her reduced to wreckage. *Below*, the *Pampas* has sunk at her moorings after a heavy air attack.

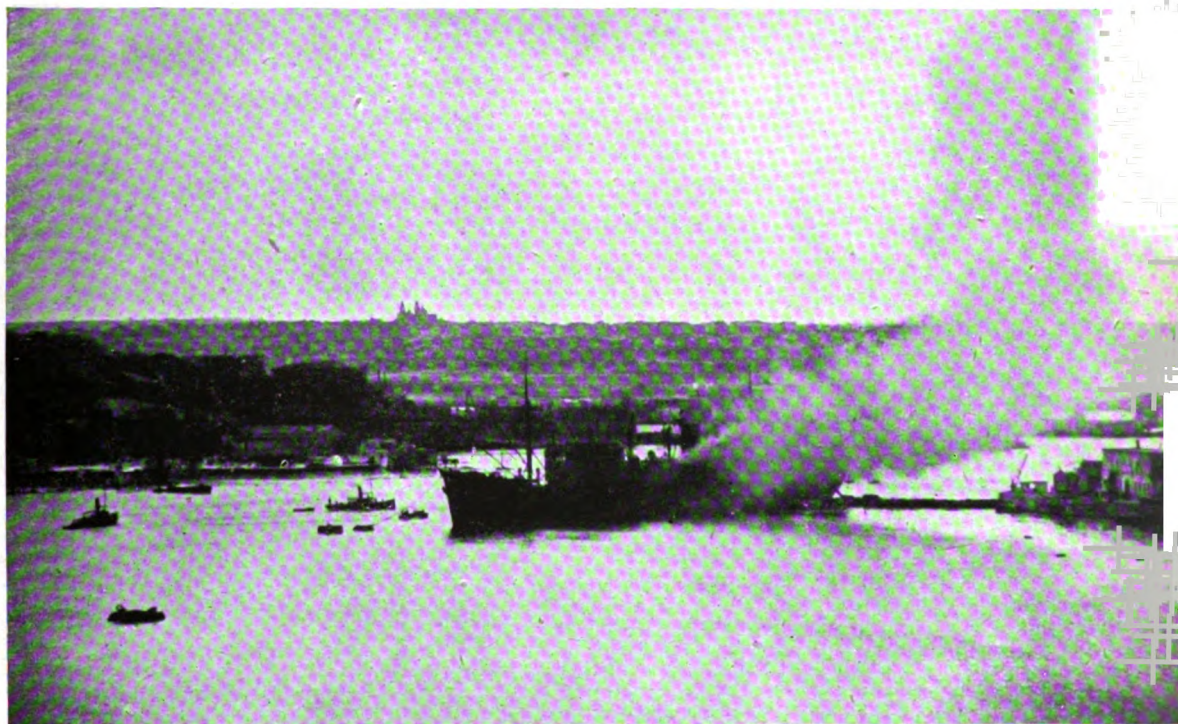
K.C.B., relieved Vice-Admiral W. T. R. Ford, K.B.E., C.B., as Vice-Admiral, Malta), and February, the incessant raids gradually increased in savagery. It was as if the Axis forces were themselves incredulous that the small island could endure the punishment they thought at first would suffice to batter it into oblivion.

The airfields became untenable by bombers, but a few naval Albacores and Swordfish continued to dodge their way into the air over craters and unexploded bombs, and by superhuman efforts a tiny striking force kept up the attacks on Rommel's supplies. The submarines, stoically accepting the conditions, their living quarters a focus of every raid, their boats and resting crews compelled to spend daylight hours at the bottom of the harbour, grimly stuck it out, and continued to wage ferocious warfare against their accustomed targets.

Strained to their limits, the patched and battered Hurricanes hit back with the fury of desperation; they even contrived fighter support for a small convoy that got in during January with ammunition. But the attempt to get another small convoy through in February had to be abandoned.

Admiral Vian was sent to make another attempt in March. He fell in with the Italian fleet plus the Luftwaffe, but by brilliant handling of his forces contrived not only to extricate his convoy of four ships from destruction, but to inflict considerable damage on the enemy. His flagship, the *Naiad*, had been sunk by a U-boat earlier in the month, and he now flew his flag in the *Cleopatra*. His force was further strengthened by the anti-aircraft cruiser *Carlisle*, and by the *Penelope* from Malta with the *Lively* in attendance.

The enemy came south in two separate



A CONVOY SURVIVOR IS HIT. The s.s. Talabot, seen on fire, was one of two ships from a convoy of four to make harbour in March, 1942. She was bombed and sunk soon after arrival in Grand Harbour, but being berthed in shallow water she settled only a few feet, and much of her cargo was saved.

forces, the first one consisting of one 8-inch and three 6-inch cruisers, and the second of the battleship *Littorio*, two 8-inch, and three 6-inch cruisers. The *Littorio* had apparently out-steamed her destroyers in her haste to intercept the British convoy.

Very much in brief, Admiral Vian's plan was to intervene a smoke curtain between the raiders and the convoy and to attack with torpedoes under cover of the smoke should the enemy attempt to break through in pursuit.

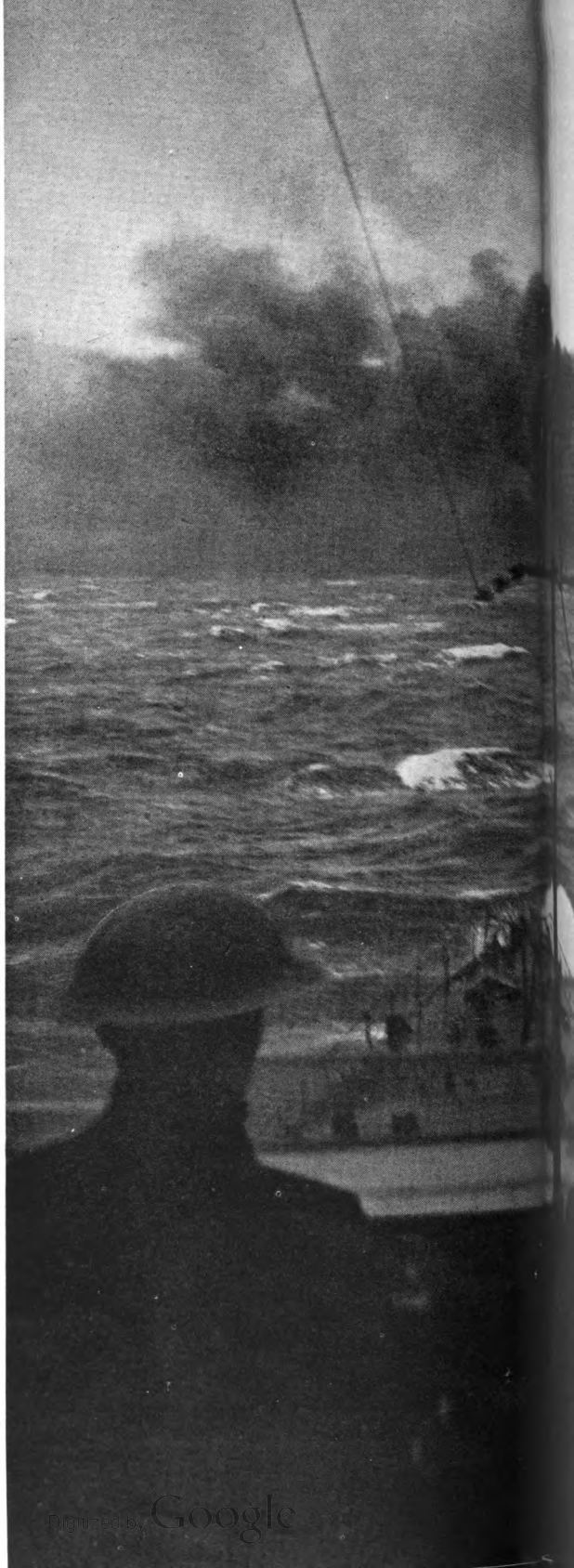
Favoured by a strong south-easterly wind, this plan, brilliantly executed, enabled him to drive off the first enemy force, but while he had gone off with his cruisers in search of two damaged enemy ships, the unsuspected battleship contingent bore down on the convoy.

The *Sikh*, *Havock*, *Lively* and *Hero* proceeded to attack with gun and torpedo. Although straddled continuously by 15-inch shells, one of which hit but did not disable the *Lively*, they succeeded in holding off the threat to the convoy until the cruisers returned.

The famous 14th Flotilla, the *Kelvin*, *Kipling*, *Kingston* and *Legion* led by the veteran *Jervis*, with the cruiser flagship *Cleopatra* and the *Euryalus* in support, then went in to attack with torpedoes. The *Littorio* was hit by a torpedo and by the cruisers' gunfire, and a cruiser was seriously damaged: they had no stomach for more, and the whole force then retreated. Before they reached their base the submarine *Urge* picked off the damaged cruiser.

Under ceaseless air attacks and in the teeth of a gale the convoy made its way to Malta. One of the four ships was sunk when only ten miles south of the island, and another, the *Breconshire*, was hit when

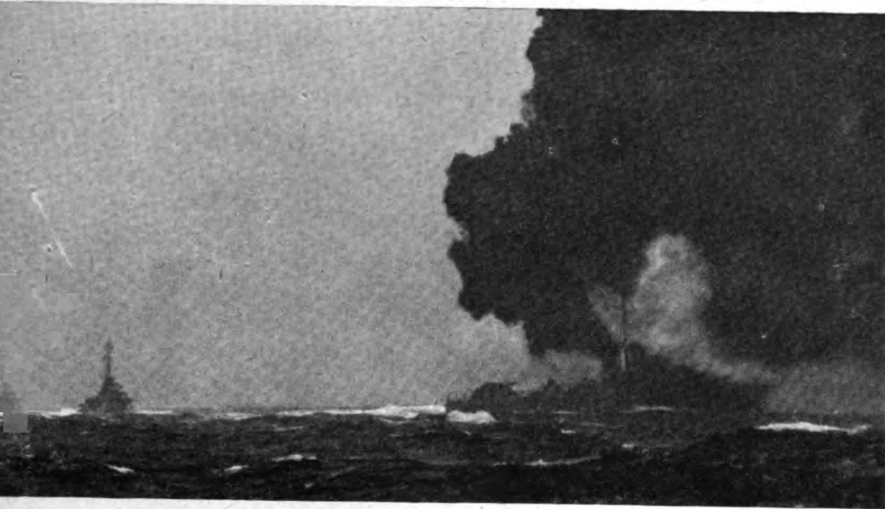
SCREEN FOR THE CONVOY. The cruiser *Cleopatra*, ahead, lays a smoke screen as enemy cruisers approach, while the *Euryalus* trains her guns ready to open fire. The convoy, which included the *Breconshire*, was bound for Malta in March, 1942, escorted by a small force of cruisers and destroyers. This photograph and those on the following three pages cover the action.







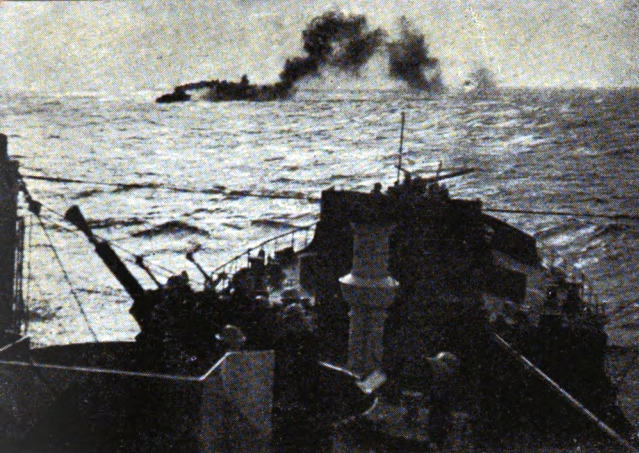
HOLDING OFF THE ENEMY. While the escorting cruisers tackle one enemy force, another consisting of the battleship Littorio and five cruisers approaches the convoy. The destroyers engage them until the cruisers return. In the pictures *above* and *below*, they are seen laying a smoke screen between the enemy and the convoy.



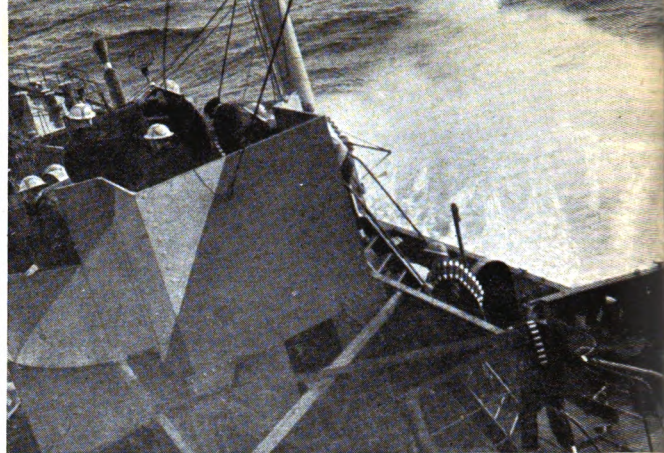
TORPEDO ATTACK. *Right*, a destroyer races out of the curtain of smoke to attack with torpedoes. *Below*, after the attack the destroyers disengage under heavy fire from the 15-inch guns of the Littorio.



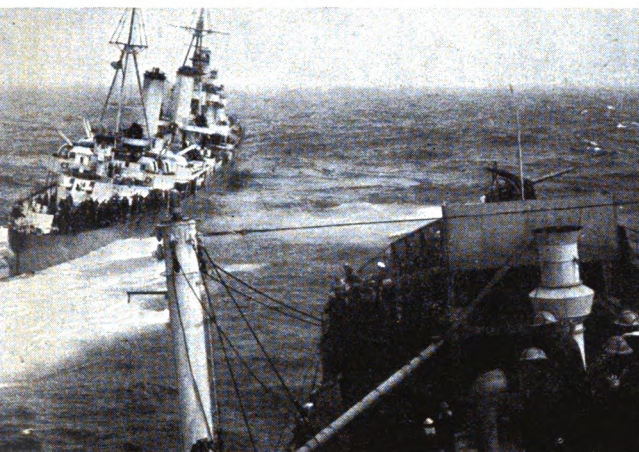




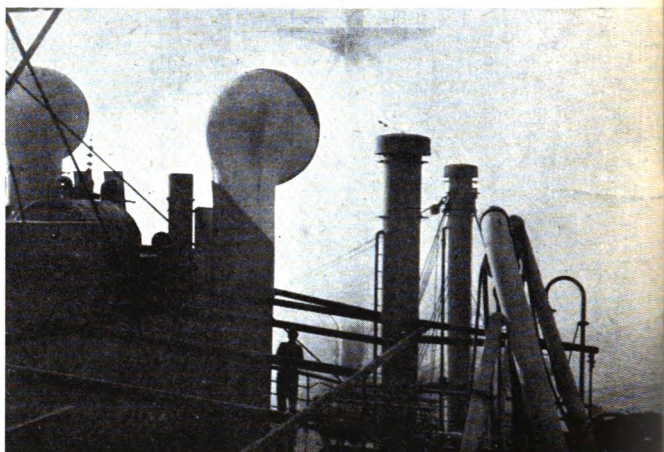
1. THE LAST RUN OF THE BRECONSHIRE.
As the enemy approaches the convoy, the forward gun crews of the supply ship Breconshire stand by.



2. The anti-aircraft guns, which have been constantly in action during ceaseless air attacks, are re-ammunitioned while the ship battles on towards Malta in a gale.



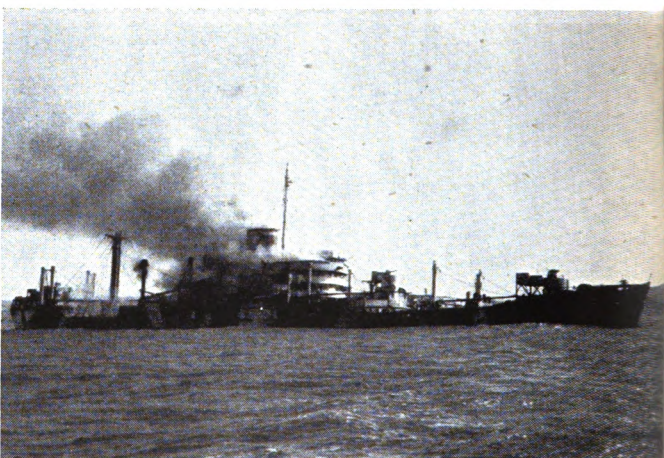
3. As the ship approaches the island she is struck by a bomb and seriously damaged. In bad weather the cruiser Penelope manoeuvres to pass across a towing wire.



4. She manages to crawl into a small bay just to the southward of the Grand Harbour, Malta. Here she is again attacked and hit by a bomb which sets her on fire.



5. The crew of the Breconshire fight the flames which have broken out in the afterhold, but in spite of their efforts the fire begins to spread slowly through the ship.



6. The fire becomes out of control and the ship sinks. Being berthed in shallow water she settles only a few feet, and many tons of oil fuel and cargo are saved.

almost home. In tow of the tugs *Ancient* and *Robust*, she crawled into a bay to the southward of the Grand Harbour, but was again hit and sank, with her invaluable cargo of oil fuel. The fight put up by the *Breconshire* on the last of her many arduous passages with stores to Malta was characteristic of the stalwart determination of her commanding officer, Captain C. A. G. Hutchison, R.N. The other two ships made the harbour and started unloading. They were soon holed as a result of mass bombing attacks, but, being berthed in shallow water, settled only a few feet. Sailors and soldiers, with divers in the flooded holds, working night and day regardless of bombs, saved much of the badly needed cargo and many precious tons of oil fuel from the *Breconshire*.

Admiral Leatham was compelled to admit that there was no longer any possibility of operating a surface striking force. The dockyard was a waste of rubble and twisted girders, and there was hardly any oil fuel left. Submarines from Alexandria—the *Parthian*, *Regent*, *Rorqual*, *Porpoise*, *Cachalot*—continued to worm their way through the minefields with aviation spirit and ammunition for the *Spitfires*; but the larger calibre ammunition reserves had dwindled alarmingly. He therefore concentrated on the task of enabling what valuable ships survived to get clear before their inevitable destruction. The *Carlisle* and four destroyers sailed for Alexandria. The *Aurora* and an attendant Hunt class destroyer, the *Avon Vale*, were got safely to Gibraltar. The *Havock* grounded off the Tunisian coast on her way to Gibraltar and was destroyed by her ship's company, who were interned by the French. The *Penelope* was caught in dock, the bull's eye in the centre of the bomber's target.

She went into dock flooded to main deck level and with her hull and keel crumpled by the concussion of near-misses. Throughout the period of repairs, her guns were hardly ever silent—indeed the barrels be-

came dangerously worn but there was no time to renew them. The coping stones of the dock around her were reduced to powder, the list of casualties grew daily longer, she was hit again and again by splinters, but with the gallant help of dockyard officials, her company fought and laboured at the repairs. The dock gates were holed and leaking badly, so that the devoted workers were often submerged to their armpits; and then, when the task was all but complete, a bomb put the pumping machinery out of action and the water rose to 21 feet. Another six inches would have taken the ship off the blocks and spelt disaster, but the pumps were repaired in the nick of time and the water mastered. They got her out at last, leaking and scarred and filthy, and on the eve of her departure the last raid of the day took place. The gunnery officer was killed, the captain wounded, all her high-angle ammunition exhausted. It seemed impossible that she could be rearmunitioned and sail in time to round Cape Bon in the sanctuary of darkness. But Captain Nicholl and his *Penelope* had been through too much together to be beaten then by circumstances. Half an hour before the time limit for her departure, she sailed, bristling like a hedgehog with the wooden pegs which plugged her sides, with the prayers of all who had helped her and now watched her go to safety.

By the end of April the enemy, with every justification, must have congratulated himself that the first part of his programme was accomplished. He had dropped on the island in that month alone 6,730 tons of bombs. The reinforcements of 70 *Spitfires* brought in by the carrier *Eagle* and the U.S. carrier *Wasp* were all damaged and unserviceable within three days of their arrival. The Luftwaffe then turned their attention to secondary targets. Nothing was too small to merit attention, from a bicycle shed to a casualty clearing hut. But Malta, at last rocking on the ropes, was not quite out. On 9th May, more *Spitfires* arrived and were up

and fighting within a few minutes of landing. As each wave of bombers came over with its attendant fighters, it was met by an even larger concentration of Spitfires. Few bombers got back to receive their medals that day. The Luftwaffe was frustrated almost as Mussolini was about to start counting Malta out. On 10th May, the minelayer Welshman steamed into harbour under an umbrella of Spitfires with sorely-needed ammunition. Massed daylight bombing came to an abrupt stop. Malta would rise to her feet again.

12. The Mediterranean's Darkest Hour

JUNE, 1942

WE MUST NOW TURN BACK, first to see what had been happening in Africa during the ordeal of Malta from January to May, 1942, then to record the disasters of June, when the British hold on the Eastern Mediterranean was shaken as never before and was only maintained by a hair's breadth.

With the surrender of the Halfaya garrison on 17th January, Egypt and Cyrenaica had been cleared of Axis forces except for those that reached El Agheila in their retreat. But on 21st January the enemy regained the offensive at El Agheila and in eight days re-entered Benghazi, and began driving eastward along the coast. Step by step the Eighth Army was forced back in an endless series of attacks and counter-attacks to fortified positions west and south of Tobruk, where for a while the enemy was held.

On 1st April, Admiral Cunningham, who

had been Naval Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean since the outbreak of war, handed over his Command. He was needed elsewhere. When it was announced that he was going to Washington none knew that he was presently to be called upon to direct and lead the Navy in an amphibious operation that was destined to change the whole face of the war.

On his departure he took leave of the remnant of the fleet that had served him so well and truly through the years of victory and set-backs. His words were signalled to men who had fought in merchant ships and battleships, in submarines and Albacores and Swordfish, in cruisers and captured schooners, in destroyers, trawlers, tugs, landing craft, motor launches and torpedo boats: men who had fought with every weapon and beaten the enemy from the Adriatic to the Gulf of Sirte, from Matapan to Benghazi, Crete to Mersa Matruh; doughty seamen who were only alive because they shot straight and their faith never failed. Brave company.

You will understand, one and all, the deep regret . . . They understood. He reminded them they were masters of the enemy in every branch of naval warfare, whether in the air, in submarine warfare or surface fighting. They knew it.

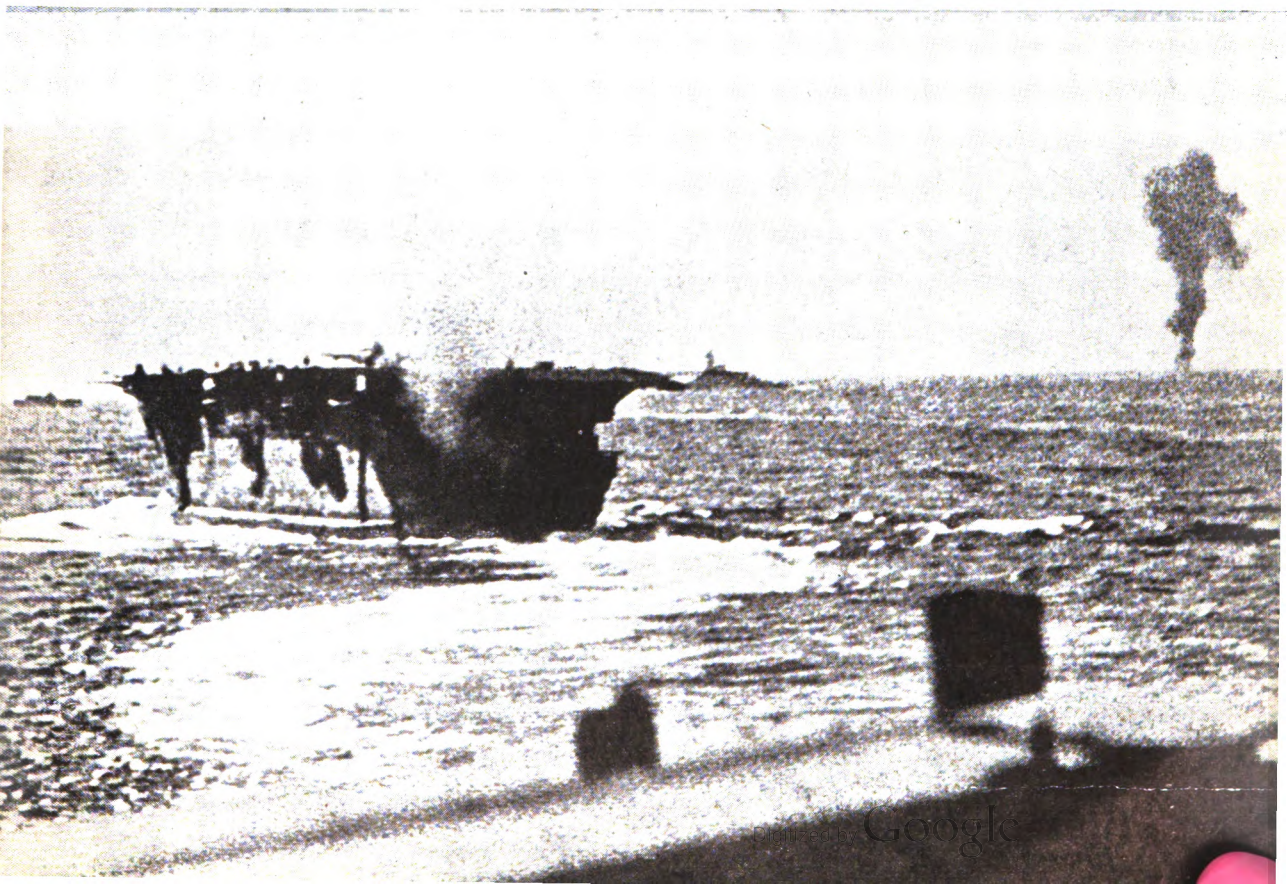
The enemy knows we are his master on the sea, and we must strain every nerve to keep our standard of fighting so high that that lesson never fails to be borne in at him. They needed no reminder.

We have not at times as large forces as we would like to carry the war to the enemy's front door. This will not always be so, and I look forward to the day when the Mediterranean Fleet will sweep the sea clear and re-establish our age-old control of this waterway so vital to the British Empire. I am confident that that day is not far distant. . . . Brave words. None knew that when this day came it was he who was destined again to be the Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean.

Until his successor arrived in May, Admiral



FIGHTING THROUGH TO MALTA. *Above*, a stick of bombs falls among the merchant ships of a convoy which sailed on 11th June, 1942. *Below*, the aircraft-carrier Argus guarding the convoy leaves a sharply twisting wake as she takes evasive action under air attack. On the horizon a plume of black smoke marks the end of an enemy aircraft.



Pridham-Wippell took command. He had been second-in-command at Matapan, second-in-command at Crete. His flagship, the *Barham*, had been sunk under him on 25th November returning from an operation in support of the Eighth Army's advance. He had had his share of weariness and watchings.

Admiral Sir Henry Harwood, K.C.B., O.B.E., late an Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff, relieved him on 20th May. At the battle of the River Plate he had been the first to reveal inherently weak places in the Nazi creed when it came to be applied to sea warfare. He had started the war a captain holding the rank of commodore; he came out to command the Mediterranean with the acting rank of full admiral. He took over at a time of sombre fortune. On 26th May the Axis renewed their offensive against the Eighth Army. The onslaught on Malta had enabled the enemy, in spite of the undiminishing ravages on his supplies by submarines, *Albacores* and *Swordfish*, to increase vastly the weight of his armour, and to reinforce his infantry for this last desperate bid for Egypt.

Similarly, the loss of North African airfields left the convoy route to Malta unprotected during the latter and most hazardous part of the journey. By land and sea and air, the scales seemed to be at last weighted against the British forces. But the plight of Malta's population, apart from military considerations, made it imperative to send succour to the island under all air support available and with a final reliance on the guns of the escorts and supporting forces.

In June it was planned to sail a convoy of ten ships from the eastward, and another of six ships from the westward. Reinforcements from the Home and Eastern Fleets were lent for the operation and the R.A.F. was stretched to the utmost to provide air cover as long as the ships were within range. The two convoys sailed on the 11th, and on the 13th the bombing started. On the 14th, two enemy battleships and four cruisers were observed to





SLIPPING OUT TO SEA AGAIN. The minelayer *Welshman*, followed by the *Cairo*, passes the breakwater of Grand Harbour, Malta, on 16th June, 1942. She has just run the gauntlet alone, unloaded desperately needed ammunition, and is putting to sea again the same evening.

leave Taranto and two cruisers and a flotilla of destroyers sailed from Palermo.

During the night the westbound convoy was continuously illuminated by aircraft flares, and attacked by E-boats and U-boats. A force of torpedo-carrying Beauforts attacked and reported torpedo hits on both battleships, but they held on their course with their speed apparently undiminished. All next day the bombing attacks on convoy and escorts continued relentlessly. Casualties began mounting: the cruiser *Hermione*, the destroyers *Hasty* and *Airedale* were sunk. The *Nestor*, disabled, was in tow of the *Javelin*. But it was the far-flung skirmishes, tactical detours and the unending air attacks that were telling on the British resources. The enemy turned back on the afternoon of the 15th, but in Admiral Vian's ships fuel and ammunition were running low.

The Commander-in-Chief had no alternative but to recall the convoy and Admiral Vian's forces to Alexandria. Only two ships of the former were lost, thanks to the Fleet's gunnery.

The Italian 8-inch cruiser *Trento*, already damaged by air attack, was sunk by the submarine *P.35*. The *Speedy* demolished a U-boat and the convoy escorts shot down over twenty bombers. By way of diversion, Captain Lord Jellicoe of the Commandos and four Free Frenchmen landed in Crete one night from a Greek submarine and threw a spanner into the Axis works to the tune of twenty aircraft, six lorries, 12,500 gallons of petrol and 400 bombs destroyed.

Meanwhile, the eastbound convoy had reached the Pantellaria area and was heavily engaged by cruisers, destroyers and aircraft. The R.A.F. fighters based at Malta provided all the support in their power. The convoy's escort held off the surface assailants, but four of the merchant ships were sunk by bombs. The other two reached harbour, and later the Welshman ran the gauntlet alone, unloaded some ammunition, and put to sea again in the evening. It was perhaps, for the civilian population, Malta's darkest

hour. Sir Edward Jackson, the Lieutenant-Governor, broadcast to the island what further deprivations and sacrifices awaited them. When darkness came they gathered round his house with accordions and guitars and serenaded him; then they went back to their tunnels and tightened their belts once more.

But the worst was not yet. Early on the morning of 20th June, a warning reached the Senior Naval Officer, Tobruk, Captain F. M. Smith, D.S.O., R.D., R.N.R., and the Senior Officer of the Inshore Squadron, Captain P. N. Walter, D.S.O., R.N., that a combined sea, air and land attack on the fortress was imminent. The strength of the garrison was known to be greater than at any time during the previous siege, and the assault was awaited with confidence. Artillery fire and bombing attacks on the harbour continued all day, and precautionary measures were taken for demolition and all eventualities. About 7 p.m., very suddenly, a force of enemy tanks came pouring over the escarpment to the southward. Shelling and bombing of the craft in harbour redoubled.

Two motor torpedo boats, commanded by Lieutenant D. Jermain, D.S.C., R.N., and Lieutenant M. H. B. Soloman, D.S.C., R.N.V.R., wove a smoke screen in and out of the small craft that were embarking personnel and wounded amid the water spouts of bursting bombs. It was due to their fearless exertions that so many of the little ships contrived to escape, although tanks had reached the entrance and were firing at point blank range on all that passed through. The *Kheir-el-Dine* and the *Esquimo Nell* were thus destroyed. The last to leave in the only remaining serviceable craft, a motor lighter, were Captain Walter and Captain Smith, after satisfying themselves the oil tanks were well alight and everything of value to the enemy blown up. Before reaching the boom the lighter came under heavy fire from tanks and artillery. The engines were put out of action and the bridge destroyed. The lighter, choked with

dead and wounded, subsequently drifted ashore, when Captain Walter, severely wounded, was taken prisoner. Captain Smith died of his wounds that night. If any individual could be said to have been the hero of the siege of Tobruk, it was this white-haired captain of the Royal Naval Reserve.

On came Rommel and the Afrika Korps, headlong for Suez. Sollum, Sidi Barrani, Mersa Matruh, all were in enemy hands by 29th June. German bombers were over the Fleet's base at Alexandria.

General Auchinleck had by then taken personal command of the operations. He watched Rommel's lengthening lines of communications, measured the distance from the Mersa Matruh water wells, timed that terrible triumphant advance to a moment when all Islam and Christendom held its breath.

Forty-five miles from Alexandria, the Eighth Army turned in its retreat. Rommel was held at Alamein.

13. Command from Suez to Gibraltar

JULY, 1942—JANUARY, 1943

IN THE WEAVING of events into so large a tapestry, little can be continuously discerned of the pattern to which ends have been directed. The drama may have seemed full of sound and fury, but without plot or climax. A picture of armies grappling backwards and forwards across the deserts of Libya, of the Navy striving to keep the Army and Air Force supplied and to deny the

enemy his essential reinforcements; of air support stretched to its heroic limit and often perforce inadequate; of sea supremacy maintained against long odds, and in the centre of it all a little half-starved island with a George Cross.

But suddenly, within the happenings of a few days, there was the meaning plain. All the events of the past slipped into their inevitable places and locked together like a breech block slammed home.

On 23rd October, 1942, General Alexander commenced his historic assault on the El Alamein line. A force of R.A.F. and naval torpedo bombers annihilated a convoy bringing oil, petrol and ammunition to the Panzer divisions at this most critical moment. Light naval forces made feint landings on the enemy's coastal flank, retiring seaward to watch his reactions to drifting smoke floats, flares and the machine-gun fire of motor torpedo boats.

Preparations had already been made for the reoccupation of the Western Desert ports as they fell into the Army's hands again. If there was one thing the bitter years had taught the Navy, it was the way in and out of the bomb-blasted desert ports, and how to supply the needs of the Army beyond them. A small fleet of tugs, schooners, salvage craft, lighters and shallow-draught supply ships was assembled in readiness at Alexandria. Captain Wauchope, who had been right-hand man to the Senior Naval Officer, Crete, took command of the newly formed Inshore Squadron and waited on events.

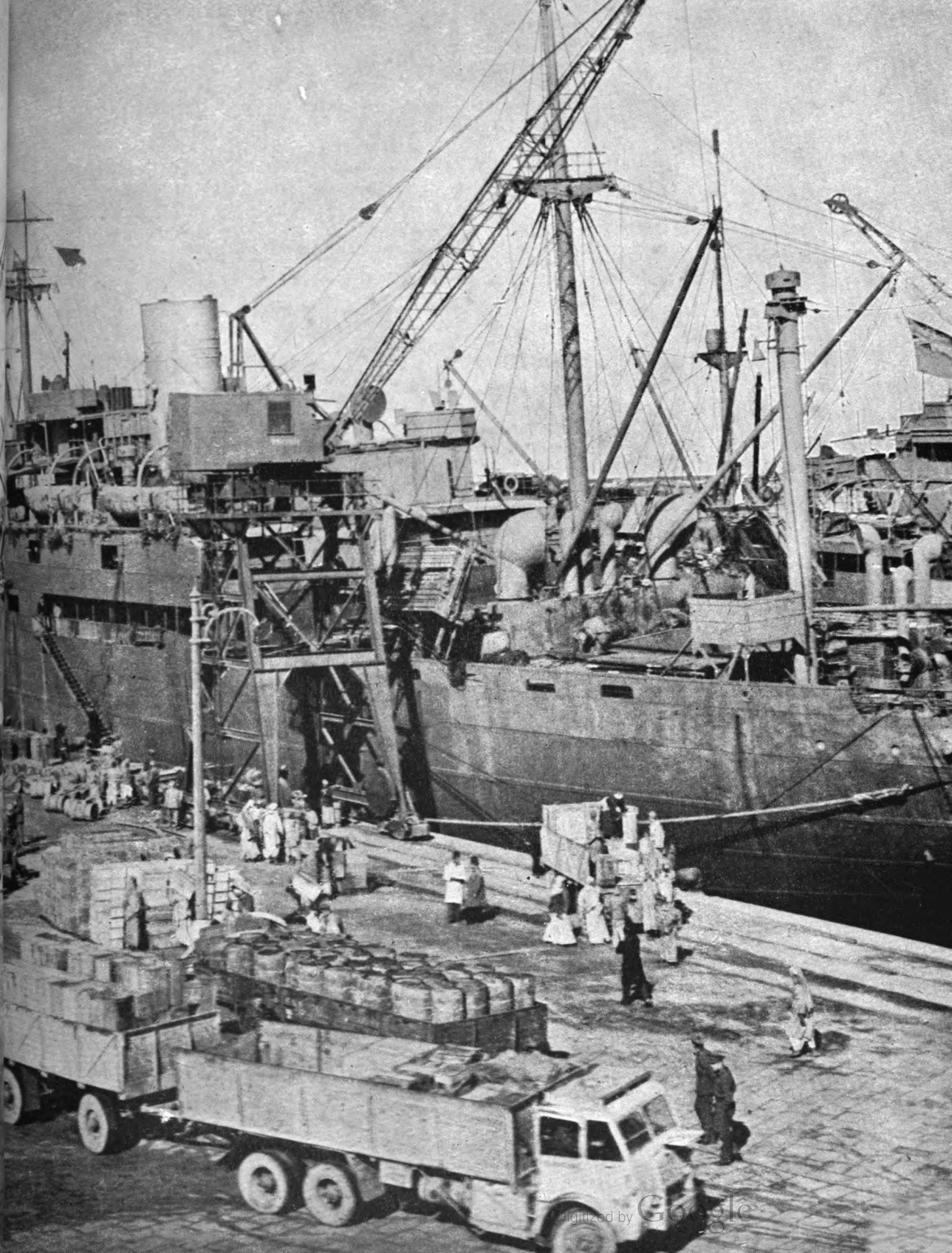
They had not long to wait. On the night of 4th November, the Eighth Army broke through the El Alamein Line and began the pursuit of the Afrika Korps. On 8th November, Mersa Matruh was in its hands again. As the sweepers Cromer, Cromarty and Boston were ridding the harbour of the mines that choked it—and cost the Cromarty her life—the first desert supply convoy sailed from Alexandria for its first base. Commander J. W. Best, D.S.O., R.N.R., became temporarily Naval Officer-in-Charge.

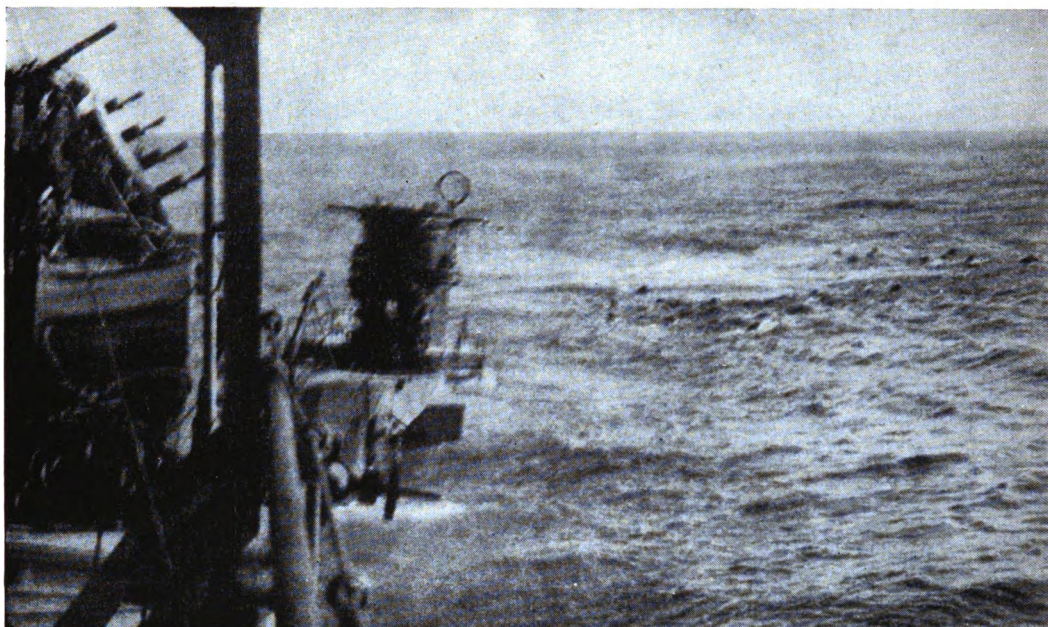
On the same day, while the triumphant Eighth Army was pursuing the Axis forces westward towards Sidi Barrani, an event was taking place which galvanised the world with new hope or new fear, according to the gods it served. Simultaneously at Casablanca on the Atlantic seaboard of French Morocco, and Oran and Algiers on the Mediterranean coast of Algeria, at one o'clock on the morning of 8th November, the armed forces of the Allies made surprise landings in formidable strength. In the initial stages of the operation the bulk of the forces were largely United States troops, but subsequent reinforcements were British ; all operations afloat within the Mediterranean were under the command of Admiral Cunningham with his headquarters at Gibraltar, which was also the headquarters of the Allied Commander-in-Chief, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, U.S. Army.

The Casablanca operations were conducted entirely by the United States forces, convoys sailing from ports in the United States, under United States air and surface escort. The convoys which were destined for the Mediterranean sailed from United Kingdom ports under the escort of the Royal Navy and Coastal Command. The two initial convoys, a fast and a slow, together with their escorts, occupied (considered as a target for submarines) 39 and 40 square miles respectively. Such was the skill of the routing and the vigilance of the escorts that it was not until they reached the Mediterranean that they suffered their first casualty, when the U.S. Transport Thomas Stone was disabled by a U-boat's torpedo and was towed to Algiers. Every ship reached her destination. The landing achieved the surprise that was aimed at, and such resistance as the French offered

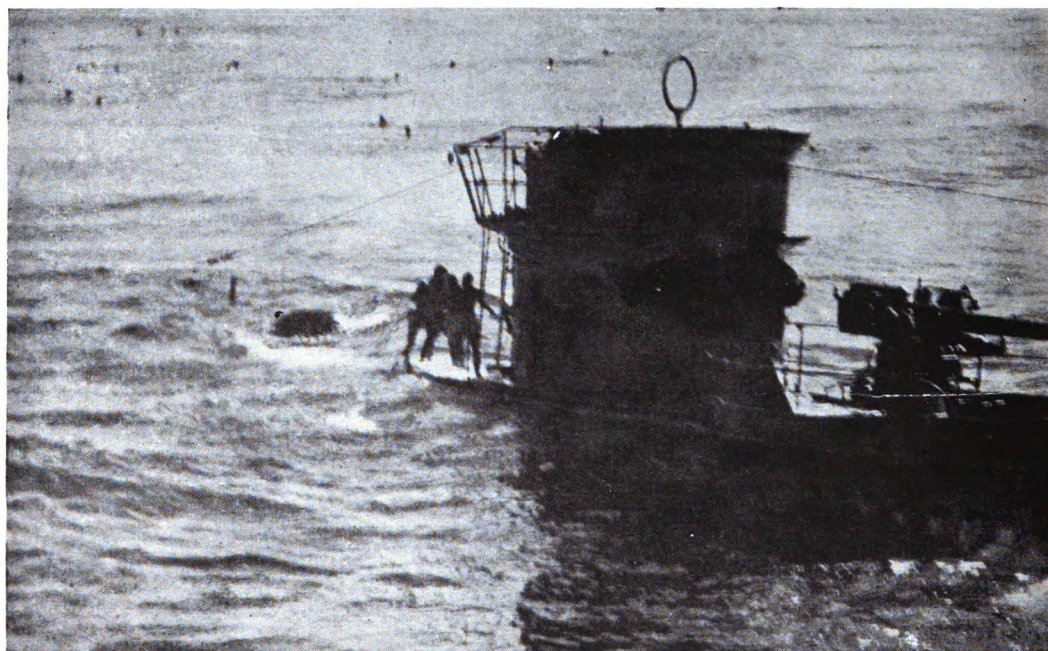
SUPPLIES FOR THE EIGHTH ARMY. A merchant ship is loaded in a Middle East port. The long pursuit from El Alamein has begun ; it is the task of the Navy to keep the advancing army supplied with food, water and ammunition.







END OF A U-BOAT. *Above*, the destroyer Ithuriel is in the act of ramming the Italian U-boat Cobalto after she has attempted to attack a convoy to Malta in August, 1942. *Below*, abaft the conning tower four Italian seamen are abandoning the submarine as she sinks by the stern, while others can be seen in the water.



had ceased throughout Algeria and Morocco by 11th November.

Having secured his bases very much more quickly than had been expected, General Eisenhower ordered the small forces that were then available to move eastward. The intention was to seize the mountain passes on the Tunisian border and, if possible, to capture Bizerta and Tunis before the Axis was able to reinforce the troops and air forces already in Tunisia. This depended upon certain weather conditions for its immediate success: absence of surf for advanced landings to occupy the airfield at Dedjelli, and a spell of dry weather to make air support possible from airfields composed of clay. Neither of these conditions existed, and the enemy held the advance with his Sicilian-based dive bombers while he poured tanks and reinforcements by sea and air into Bizerta. Phenomenal rains converted the Algerian landing grounds to lakes of gluey mud.

But although the Allied advance was temporarily held, it meant that Rommel had, somewhere in his rear, no longer the Vichy-dominated fertile expanses of Algeria with Morocco beyond as an ultimate refuge. He could not go on retreating indefinitely. Sooner or later, unless he could hold the Eighth Army, he was going to be gripped between it and the First Army, with his Afrika Korps in the jaws of a vice. In this uncomfortable realisation he continued his retreat.

Meanwhile, although further large reinforcements of Spitfires had practically ensured immunity of attack from the air for Malta, food for the population and petrol for the Spitfires became the paramount necessity. The last convoy reached them from the westward in August, 1942. It was passed through the Atlantic and Mediterranean as a fleet operation under command of Vice-Admiral Sir Neville Syfret, K.C.B. Five ships reached Malta after savage attacks by torpedoes from submarines and aircraft, almost continuous high-level and low-level bombing, and night attacks by E-boats.

Of these five ships, the Ohio, Brisbane Star, Rochester Castle, Melbourne Star and Port Chalmers, Admiral Syfret wrote in his despatch: "The steadfast manner in which these ships pressed on their way to Malta, through all attacks, answering every manœuvring order like a well-trained fleet unit, was a most inspiring sight. . . . The memory of their conduct will remain an inspiration to all who were privileged to sail with them."

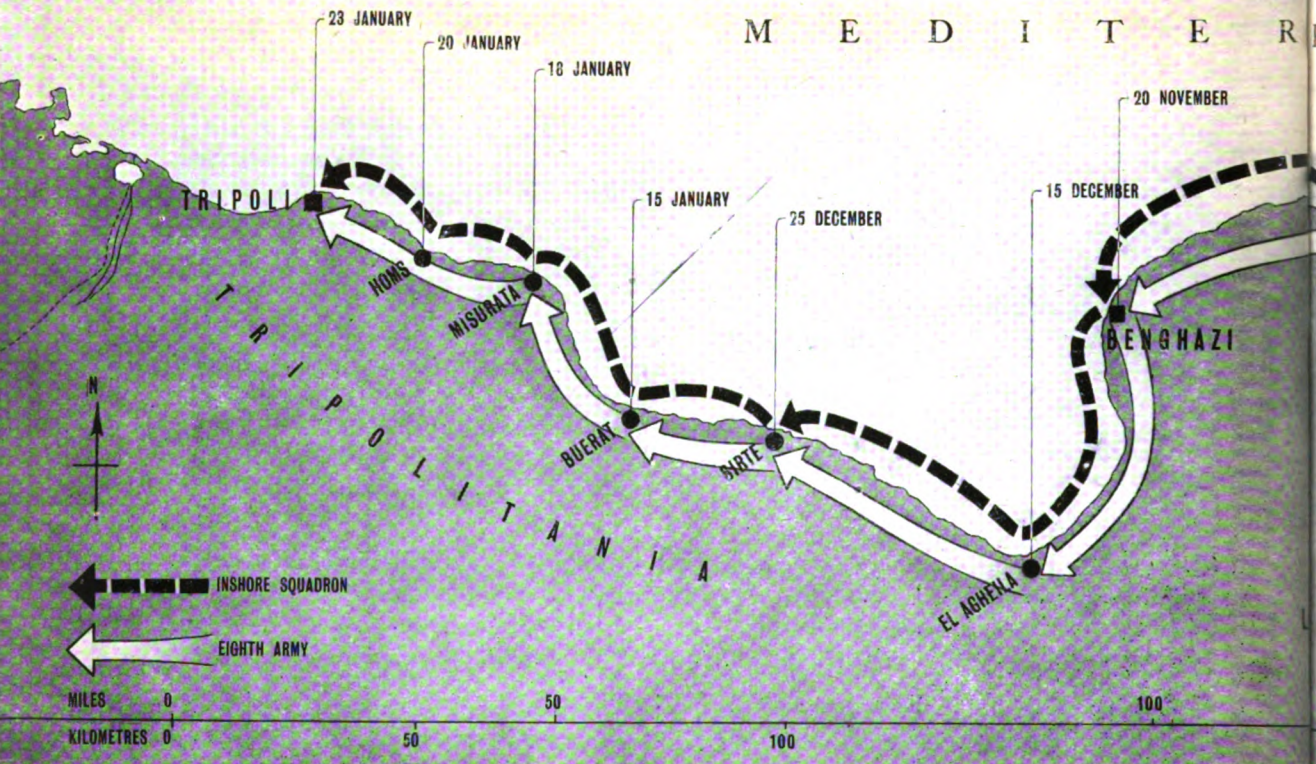
After this the Welshman from Gibraltar and submarines slipped in when possible with cased aviation spirit, but until the Cyrenaican airfields were in British hands no convoys from the east could hope to get through "bomb alley." The need, however, became so urgent that the fast minelayer Manxman was sailed on 11th November with a cargo of dried milk and concentrated foodstuffs. She got through unscathed. As she entered the Grand Harbour the population flocked to the water's edge, women falling on their knees and holding their babies up that they might see and remember all their days the spearhead of their deliverance.

A week later four store ships reached Malta intact. In December nearly 60,000 tons of cargo were discharged. The lean days were over, and Malta girded herself for a merciless offensive.

Early in September Admiral Vian relinquished his command of the 15th Cruiser Squadron to Rear-Admiral A. J. Power, C.B., C.V.O., the first captain of the Ark Royal and recently an Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff.

Admiral Vian had been continuously afloat in command of flotillas and squadrons since the war started. In the Mediterranean he had never taken his cruisers to sea without some expectation of having to fight the Italian battlefleet, and had fought the most brilliant disengaging action in the records of modern warfare.

Admiral Power took the 15th Cruiser Squadron and the 12th and 14th Destroyer



KEEPING PACE WITH THE ARMY. This map shows the problems of supply created by the speed and distance of the Eighth Army's advance from El Alamein to Tripoli. As one harbour after another was cleared of obstructions, the little

Flotillas back to Malta at the end of November. With his submarines and his naval minelaying and torpedo-bombing aircraft reinforced, Admiral Leatham again had an adequate striking force with which to scourge the desert supply lines.

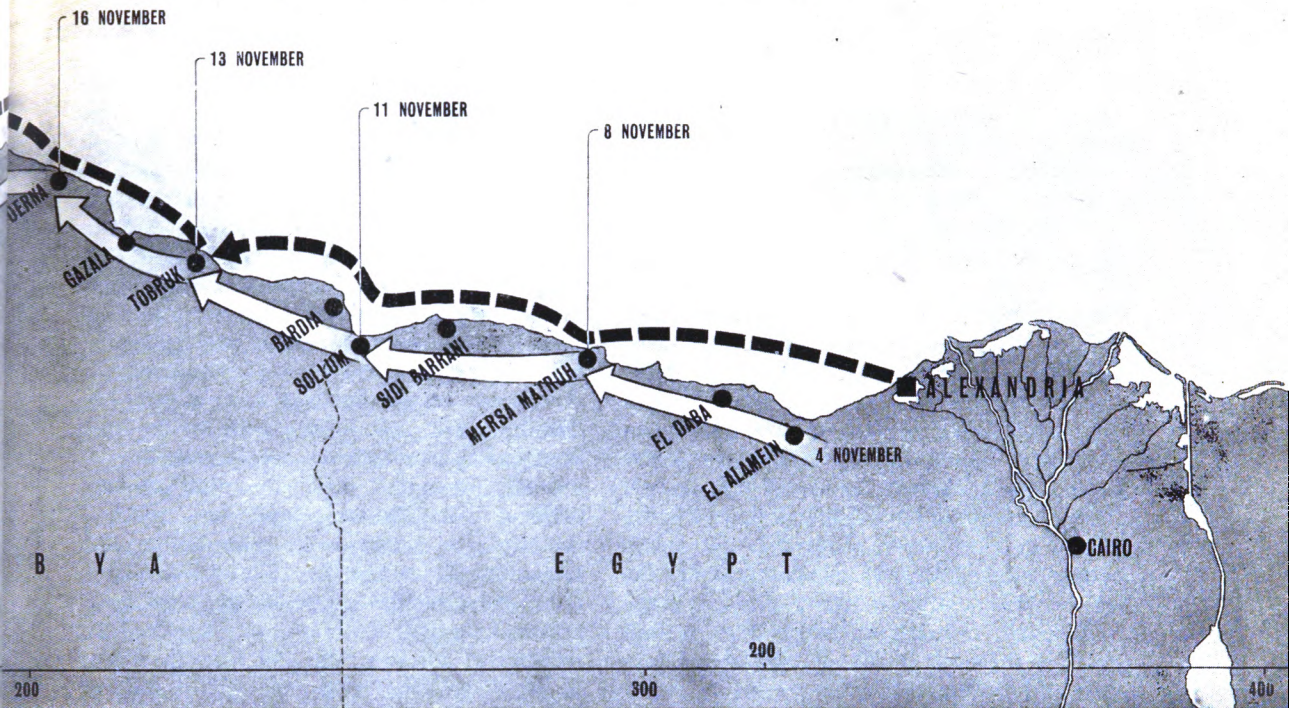
The Jervis, Javelin, Nubian and Kelvin left soon after their arrival to intercept an enemy convoy of three ships, two E-boats and a destroyer bound for North Africa. Naval aircraft and a patrolling submarine, the P.35, also heard about the convoy, and got there first. The Italian destroyer was the only ship left afloat when the surface craft arrived, and her end was swift.

Here then we take leave of the Malta striking force, most characteristically employed, and return to the Inshore Squadron.

By 13th November, Tobruk was cleared of the enemy and reoccupied. The Axis

troops had had little time for further demolition. The water supplies were untouched. The naval base party hoisted the White Ensign over what remained of Admiralty House, and wandered about the familiar ruins in search of booby traps. Thanks to the visitations of R.A.F. bombers, the wrecks in the harbour, where the Chakla's rusty bows again grinned a welcome, now numbered 101; but the obstructions were cleared sufficiently to enable the first convoy to enter on the 19th and start unloading. Commander A. H. Alexander, R.N., became Naval Officer-in-Charge.

Faster went the pursuit by the Eighth Army, but the mobile beach party and the Inshore Squadron managed to keep pace with the Army's needs, although gales hindered the operations of small craft. Derna fell on the 16th and at noon on 20th



ships of the Inshore Squadron slipped in with supplies, while the mobile naval beach parties, keeping up with the advance guard of the Army, established landing points along the open beaches where flat-bottomed lighters could bring in vital stores.

November, the forward elements of the Eighth Army reached Benghazi. Here again the speed of the pursuit had left the enemy with no time to block the harbours, although he had contrived to breach the moles. The naval sweepers had cleared the harbour of mines by the 22nd, and the port was a going concern with its Navy House almost undamaged. Commander Campbell, sometime captain of the Aphis, moved into it as Naval Officer-in-Charge.

Benghazi now became the main base of supply for the Eighth Army, through which the convoys delivered tanks, petrol, personnel, ammunition and stores as if on a rapidly moving endless belt. By the end of December, cargo discharge reached 3,000 tons daily, a figure the Italians were never able to achieve, and there must have been moments when they tried hard enough.

On 24th November, the fugitive enemy started to dig himself in on the El Agheila line, momentarily checking the retreat. General Montgomery rested and regrouped his forces, probably not sorry to give his army their first respite since he broke the Alamein line. For three weeks they had pursued what the Navy would call "an enemy beaten and flying," and they chased him just as fast as the Inshore Squadron could revictual, refuel, reammunition and water the sweating pursuit. They had come 800 miles in 21 days.

On 15th December, having built up in three weeks sufficient reserves for an overwhelming assault, General Montgomery found the enemy unwilling to stand against the renewed attack, and the pursuit to the westward was resumed. Sirte fell on Christmas Day.

Lack of armour (thanks mainly to the British submarines and torpedo-bombers) kept Rommel ceaselessly on the move, always striving to fall back faster than he could be outflanked. But at Buerat on a short line between the sea and a series of almost impregnable *wadis* athwart his right flank, again he turned at bay. Again General Montgomery paused to gather his "build up" for the forward surge that would throw the Axis out of Tripolitania.

Throughout the advance the forward elements of the Eighth Army had been sustained with food, ammunition and water by a small naval mobile beach party. Under Commander F. H. Ashton, R.N., sometimes even ahead of the most advanced patrols, they surveyed beaches along the inhospitable unfrequented Libyan coast, built jetties when necessary and nursed supplies forward in flat-bottomed landing craft and in a small Chinese coasting steamer called the *Ah Kwang*, sometimes accompanied by the *Zingarella*, whom the *Voyager* had made a prize two years before. Supplies for the main forces moved forward by road from the most recent naval base, but it was the mobile beach party that enabled the advance elements to maintain their swift advance and ceaseless contact with the fleeing enemy. Altogether they moved forward and unloaded over 7,000 tons of food, petrol and ammunition on beaches that had almost invariably to be cleared of mines.

On 15th January, 1943, General Montgomery attacked the Buerat line, at the same time outflanking over the *wadis* with a New Zealand Division and the Seventh Armoured Division, the immortal "Desert Rats." There he intensified the armoured pressure on the flank, bringing all the weight of his artillery into the frontal attack. He squeezed Rommel out of his last bottleneck where natural obstacles could temporarily guard his ever vulnerable flank, and rolled him onward towards the First Army and his doom.

On 18th January, Misurata fell, on 20th Homs, and on 23rd January, 1943, the Eighth Army was in Tripoli.

This time the enemy had had time to concentrate on demolition. For weeks the not inconsiderable ability of the Italian engineers had been diverted to blocking the entrances to Tripoli Harbour in order to delay supplies to the Army. A naval salvage party formed part of the advanced forces and within five hours of the surrender, the survey of the harbour was in progress. The minesweepers did not wait for the harbour to be cleared; they swept an anchorage outside, and on 26th the first convoy arrived. The Italians, when they blocked the entrance, had meant to deny the harbour for weeks, if not months. On 28th January, five days after the capture of the port, there was a channel through the blockships; under the administration of Captain Wauchope of the Inshore Squadron, the flow of cargo increased until it was pouring through in a stream that mounted to an average of over 4,000 tons a day. The battle for Crete had left Captain Wauchope with one or two old scores to repay. With the pleasant reflection that war sometimes makes repayment possible, he watched the reserves for the next great offensives, in which the Navy would play an increasingly important part, piling up under his hand.

The Mediterranean Fleet now had a port capable of supplying the Eighth Army on a scale commensurate with the task that lay ahead. With the fall of Tripoli, another phase in the conquest of the Mediterranean came to an end. Much had been done, but, looking ahead, there was still much yet to do.

The next objective was to expel the enemy from Africa; then, further into the future, were the assaults upon Sicily and the mainland of Europe. These land campaigns would not be possible, could not in fact even be contemplated, until the command of the sea had been assured. It was now assured. The Mediterranean Fleet, which had fought

so long and bitterly, found at last the resistance of the enemy crumbling away. The strength of the Italian Fleet and Air Force, and of the Luftwaffe, which had been the most formidable opponent, was in decline.

The Mediterranean had long been a battlefield. It was to become once again a great supply route for the world; a route over which was to pass all the apparatus for these gigantic military operations.

Meanwhile, in preparation for the first through convoy from the west, the minesweepers were busy sweeping a war channel 200 miles long, from Tabarka to Sousse, and clearing the entrances to Tunis and Bizerta.

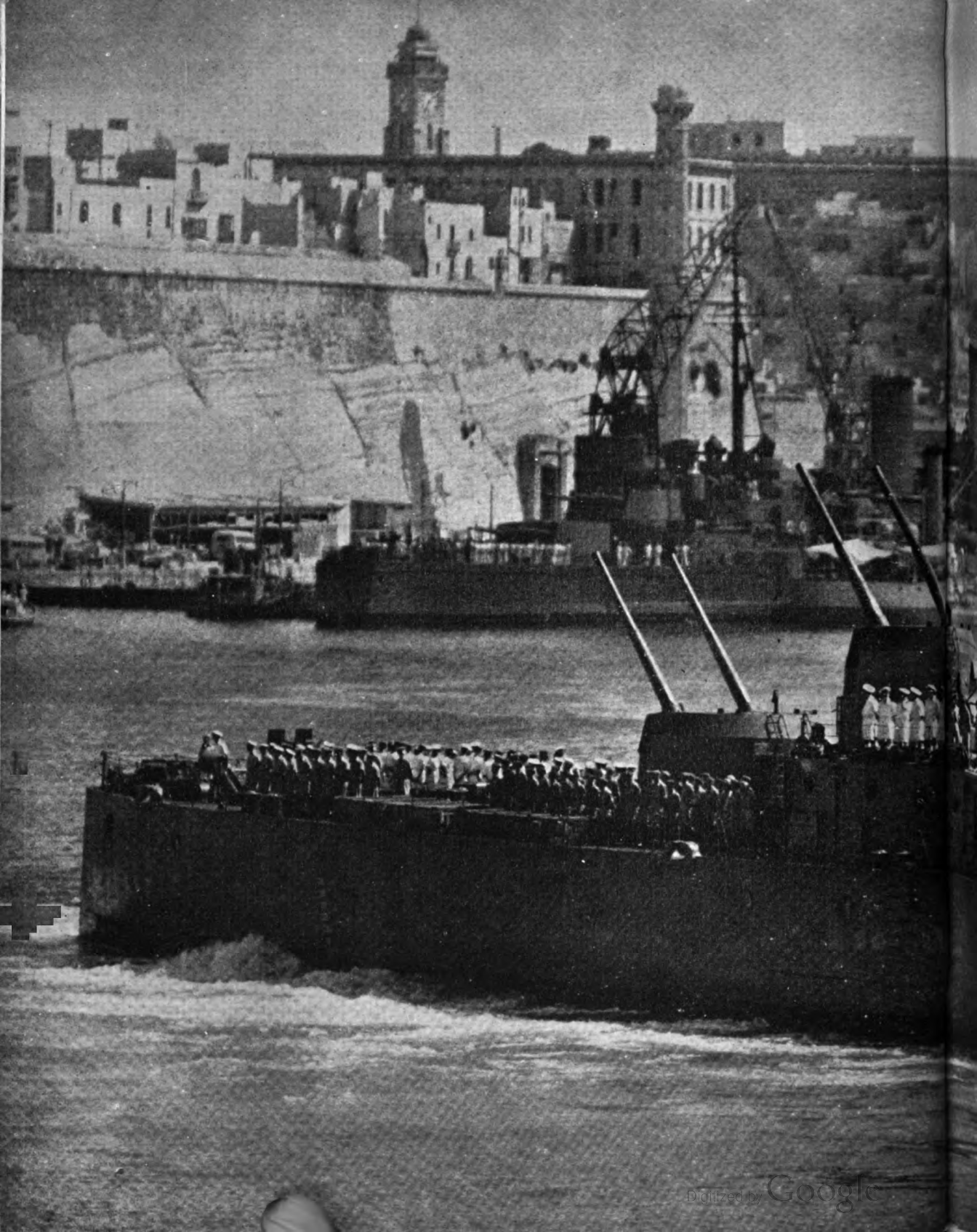
Of all the Navy's tasks this was the least spectacular, the most unrelenting. It was sometimes delayed a little but never deterred by swift and violent storms, explosive anti-sweeping devices, the assaults of bombers

and fighter machine-guns; it was probably the greatest minesweeping feat in history.

The first convoy left Gibraltar on 17th May, and reached Alexandria without incident on the 26th. The Mediterranean was open again from end to end, and it was to the minesweepers that Admiral Cunningham sent his congratulations.

Greece, Crete, Tobruk, Malta, Tripoli. . . . Long odds all the way till now. But the tide had turned at last. There was still work for the Navy in support of the campaign in Italy, but the Allied position in the Mediterranean was now secure. And while in the Atlantic and in northern seas the Navy's tasks remained, the Mediterranean victory brought with it, as not its smallest gain, the opportunity of turning in greater force towards the new tasks waiting in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.









"It is upon the Navy, under the good providence of God, that the wealth, safety and strength of the Kingdom do chiefly depend" *bw*



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